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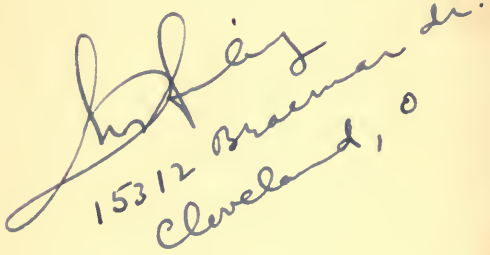

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THE BLACK

BOOKS BY

ANGEL ESQUIRE
THE ANGEL OF TERROR
THE BLACK ABBOT
BLUE HAND
CAPTAINS OF SOULS
THE CLEVER ONE
THE CLUE OF THE NEW PIN
THE CLUE OF THE TWISTED CANDLE
THE CRIMSON CIRCLE
THE DAFFODIL MURDER
THE DARK EYES OF LONDON
DIANA OF KARA-KARA
THE DOOR WITH SEVEN LOCKS
THE FACE IN THE NIGHT
THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE FROG
THE FLYING SQUAD
THE FOUR JUST MEN
THE GIRL FROM SCOTLAND YARD
THE GREEN ARCHER
GREEN RUST
GUNMAN'S BLUFF
THE HAIRY ARM
JACK O'JUDGMENT
KATE PLUS 10
A KING BY NIGHT
THE MAN WHO KNEW
THE MELODY OF DEATH
THE MISSING MILLIONS
THE MURDER BOOK OF J. G. REEDER
THE NORTHING TRAMP
THE RINGER
THE SECRET HOUSE
THE SINISTER MAN
THE SQUEALER
THE STRANGE COUNTESS
TAM O' THE SCOOTS
THE TERRIBLE PEOPLE
TERROR KEEP
THE TRAITORS' GATE
THE THREE JUST MEN
THE TWISTER
THE VALLEY OF GHOSTS

THE BLACK

By EDGAR WALLACE

A. L. BURT COMPANY
PUBLISHERS
New York Chicago

Published by arrangement with Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.

Printed in U. S. A.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

SRLF
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mc:4709685

TO MARNEY

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THE BLACK

CHAPTER I

The Black

JAMES LEXINGTON MORLAKE, gentleman of leisure, Lord of the Manor of Wold and divers other titles which he rarely employed, unlocked the drawer of his elaborate Empire writing-table and gazed abstractedly into its depths. It was lined with steel and there were four distinct bolts. Slowly he put in his hand and took out first a folded square of black silk, then a businesslike automatic pistol, then a roll of fine leather. He unfastened a string that was tied about the middle and unrolled the leather on the writing-table. It was a hold-all of finely-grained sealskin, and in its innumerable pockets and loops was a bewildering variety of tools, grips, ratchets—each small, each of the finest tempered steel.

He examined the diamond-studded edge of a bore, no larger than a cheese tester, then replacing the tool, he rolled up the hold-all and sat back in his chair, his eyes fixed meditatively upon the articles he had exposed.

James Morlake's flat in Bond Street was, perhaps, the most luxurious apartment in that very exclusive thoroughfare. The room in which he sat, with its high ceiling fantastically carved into scrolls and arabesques by the most cunning of Moorish workmen, was wide and long and singular. The walls were of marble, the floor an amazing mosaic covered with the silky rugs of Ispahan. Four hanging lamps, delicate fabrics of silver and silk, shed a subdued light.

With the exception of the desk, incongruously gaudy in the severe and beautiful setting, there was little furniture. A low divan under the curtained window, a small stool, lacquered a vivid green, and another chair was all.

The man who sat at the writing-table might have been forty —he was four years less—or fifty. His was the face of a savant,

eager, alive, mobile. There was a hint of laughter in his eyes, more than a hint of sadness. A picturesque and most presentable person was James Lexington Morlake, reputedly of New York City (though some doubted this) and now of 823 New Bond Street in the County of London and of Wold House in the County of Sussex. His evening coat fitted the broad shoulders perfectly; the white bow at his collar was valet-tied.

He looked up from the table and its sinister display and clapped his hands once. Through the silken curtain that veiled the far end of the room came a soft-footed little Moor, his spotless white fellap and crimson tarboosh giving him a certain vividness against the soft background.

"Mahmet, I shall be going away to-night—I will let you know when I am returning." He spoke in Moorish, which is the purest of the three Arabics. "When, by the favour of God, I return, I shall have work for you."

Mahmet raised his hand in salute, then, stepping forward lightly, kissed each lapel of James Morlake's dress coat before he kissed his own thumb, for Morlake was, by certain standards, holy to the little slave man he had bought in the marketplace of Rahbut.

"I am your servant, *haj*," he said. "You will wish to talk with your secretary?"

Morlake nodded, and, with a quick flutter of salaaming hands, Mahmet disappeared. He had never ceased to be amused by this description of Binger. "Secretary" was the delicate euphemism of the Moor who would not say "servant" of any white man.

Mr. Binger appeared, a short, stout man with a very red face and a very flaxen moustache, which he rapidly twirled in moments of embarrassment. Without the evidence of the neatly parted hair and the curl plastered over his forehead, he was obviously "old soldier."

He looked at his employer and then at the kit of tools on the table, and sighed.

"Goin' hout, sir?" he asked dolefully.

He was that unusual type of Cockney, the man who put aspirates where none were intended. Not one Londoner in

ten thousand has this trick, ninety per cent. may drop an "h" —only the very few find it.

"I'm going out; I may be away for some days. You know where to find me."

"I *hope* so, sir," said the gloomy Binger. "I hope I shan't find you where I'm always expectin' to find you—in a hawful prison cell."

James Morlake laughed softly.

"You were never designed by providence to be a burglar's valet, Binger," he said, and Mr. Binger shivered.

"Don't use that word, sir, please! It makes me tremble with horrer! It's not for the likes of me to criticise, which I've never done. An' if you hadn't been a burglar I'd have been a corpse. You ran a risk for me and I'm not likely to forget it!"

Which was true. For one night, James Lexington Morlake, in the course of business, had broken into a warehouse of which Binger was caretaker. Morlake took the warehouse *en route* to a bigger objective—there was a bank at the end of the warehouse block—and he had found an almost lifeless Binger who had fallen through a trap and had broken a leg in the most complicated manner it is possible to break a leg. And Morlake had stopped and tended him; carried him to the hospital, though Binger guessed him for what he was, "The Black"—the terror of every bank manager in the kingdom. In this way both men, taking the most amazing risks, came into acquaintance. Not that it was, perhaps, any great risk for James Morlake, for he understood men.

He selected a cigarette from the gold case he took from his pocket, and lit it.

"One of these days, perhaps I'll become a respectable member of society, Binger," he said, a chuckle in his voice.

"I 'ope so, sir, I do most sincerely pray you will," said Binger earnestly. "It's not a nice profession—you're hout all hours of the night . . . it's not healthy! Speaking as a hold soldier, sir, I tell you that honesty is the best policy."

"How the devil did you know that there was an 'h' in 'honesty?' " asked James Morlake admiringly.

"I pronounced it, sir," said Binger.

"That is what I mean—now, Binger, listen to me. I want the car at the corner of Albemarle Street at two o'clock. It is raining a little, so have the hood up. Don't be within a dozen yards of the car when I arrive. Have an Oxford number-plate behind and the Sussex plate under the seat. A vacuum flask with hot coffee and a packet of sandwiches—and that's all."

Binger, at the parting of the curtains, struggled to express what he felt was improper and even sinful to say.

"Good luck, sir," he said faintly.

"I wish you meant it," said James Morlake as he rose and, catching up the long black coat from the divan, slipped pistol and tools into his pocket. . . .

At the Burlington Street Safe Deposit, the night watchman had a stool on which he might sit in the lone long watches. It was a stool with one leg in the centre, and had this great advantage, that, if its occupant dozed, he fell. Nature, however, evolves qualities to meet every human emergency, and in the course of the years the night watchman, by leaning his elbow on a projecting ledge and stiffening his body against the wall, could enjoy a comfortable condition of coma that approximated to sleep. . . .

"Sorry!" said a gentle voice.

The watchman woke with a start and stumbled to his feet, reaching for the revolver that should have been on the little wooden ledge.

"Your gun is in my pocket and the alarm is disconnected," said the man in black, and the eyes that showed through the taut silk mask that covered his face twinkled humorously. "March!"

The night man, dazed and already searching his mind for excuses that would relieve him of the charge of sleeping on duty, obeyed.

The vaults of the Burlington Street Safe Deposit are underground, and for the use of the watchman there is a small concrete apartment fitted with an electric stove and a folding table. There is also a small safe built into the wall.

"In here," said the man in black. "Face the wall and save my soul from the hideous crime of murder."

Standing with his nose to concrete, the watchman heard the snap of a lock and the jingle of keys. In the safe were kept the pass keys and duplicates, and normally it could not be opened except by the President or Secretary of the company. The stranger seemed to experience no difficulty in dispensing with the help of these officers.

There came the thud of the room door closing, and then the turn of the key. After that, silence, except for the shrill whistle of air through the overhead ventilator. In ten minutes the visitor was back again, and the watchman saw him replace the keys he had taken, close and lock the safe.

"That is all, I think," said the stranger. "I have stolen very little—just enough to pay for my vacation and a new car. One must live."

"I'll get fired over this!" groaned the watchman.

"It depends on the lie you tell," said the mask, standing in the doorway, twirling his automatic alarmingly. "If you say that you were drugged, as the night patrol at the Home Counties Bank said, you may find people sceptical . . ."

"What about the hall-man?" asked the watchman hopefully.

"He is in his box, asleep . . . veritably doped by an ingenious method of my own," said the intruder.

He slammed the door, and again the key turned. It seemed to turn twice, and so it proved, for when the custodian tried the door it opened readily. But The Black had gone.

Three headquarters men were at the safe deposit within a few minutes of the alarm sounding. They found the hall-keeper slowly recovering his senses and the night watchman voluble and imaginative.

"Don't tell me that stuff about drugs," said Chief Inspector Wall irritably. "It may go in the case of the hall-man, but you were asleep, and as soon as he turned a gun on you, you played rabbit. That's your story, and I won't listen to any other."

The hall-man could offer no explanation. He was sitting in

his little office drinking coffee that he had made, and that was all he remembered.

"Keep that coffee-cup for analysis," said Wall. "The man must have been on the premises—it was easy once he doped the hall-keeper."

The upper part of the safe deposit was let out in office suites, the ground floor and basement being the premises of the deposit. A broad passage led from the street to the vault entrance, and was barred half-way down with a heavy steel gate to which the hall-man sitting in his office on the inside alone had the key.

"The thing was simple," said Wall, when he had finished his cross-examination. "Peters left his office and went down to see the night man. In some manner The Black got through—he'll open any lock. After that he had only to watch and wait."

In the early hours of the morning the secretary of the Safe Deposit arrived, and accompanied the police in a more thorough search through the inner vaults.

One little safe was unlocked. It was that which stood in the name of James Morlake, and the safe was entirely empty.

CHAPTER II

The Lady of Creith

STEPHENS, the butler at Creith House, read of the robbery in the morning newspaper, and, being of a communicative nature, he carried the news to his master with his morning coffee. He might have created a greater sensation had he told the guest of the house, but he disliked Mr. Ralph Hamon for many reasons, and added to his dislike was a certain uneasiness of mind. A servant may find pleasure in his prejudices only so long as they are directed toward the uninfluential. So Mr. Ralph Hamon had appeared on his first few visits to the

Earl of Creith. His attitude of deference toward the head of the house, his humility in the presence of the young lady, his eagerness to please, emphasised his inferiority. But his desire to stand well with the folk of Creith House did not extend to the servants. The tips he gave were paltry or were pointedly withheld, but for this Stephens and his staff were prepared, for Mr. Hamon's chauffeur had advertised his meanness in advance.

It was the change in the financier's attitude toward the family that worried Stephens and caused his plump, smooth face to wrinkle in uncomfortable thought.

In the early days he had addressed the Earl as "my lord"—and only servants and tenants and tradesmen "my lord nobility." And Lady Joan had been "your ladyship." Now it was "my dear Creith" and "my dear young lady," more often than not in a tone of good-natured contempt.

Stephens stood at the long window of the banqueting hall, staring across the broad expanse of shaven lawn to the river that traced the northern boundary of the Creith acres. It was a glorious morning in early autumn. The trees held to their deep green, but here and there the russet and gold of autumnal foliage showed on the wooded slopes of No Man's Hill. Sunlight sparkled on the sluggish Avon, the last wraith of mist was curling through the pines that crested the hill, and the tremendous silence of the countryside was broken only by the flurry of wings as a hen pheasant flew clumsily from covert to covert.

"Morning, Stephens."

Stephens turned guiltily as he heard the voice of the man about whom he was at that moment thinking so disrespectfully.

Ralph Hamon had come noiselessly into the panelled hall. He was a fair man of middle height, stockily built, inclined to stoutness. Stephens put his age at forty-five, being inclined, for personal reasons, to discount the visitor's slight baldness. Mr. Hamon's large face was sallow and usually expressionless. His high, bald forehead, his dark, deep-set eyes and the uncompromising line of his hard mouth suggested learning. Stephens was reminded of a hateful schoolmaster he had known in his youth. The baldness was emphasised by the floss-like wisp of hair that

grew thinly on the crown, and was especially noticeable when he stooped to pick up a pin from the polished floor.

"That is lucky," he said, as he pushed the pin into the lapel of his well-fitting morning coat. "There's no better way of starting the day than by getting something for nothing, Stephens."

"No, sir," said Stephens. He had a desire to point out that the pin was somebody's property, but he refrained. "There has been another Black robbery, sir," he said.

Hamon snatched the paper from his hand, frowning.

"A Black robbery—where?"

He read and his frown deepened.

"The Burlington this time," he said, speaking to himself. "I wonder——?" He glared at Stephens, and the stout man wilted. "I wonder," said Mr. Hamon again, and then, abruptly: "Lord Creith is not down?"

"No, sir."

"And Lady Joan?"

"Her ladyship is in the park. She went riding an hour ago."

"Humph!"

Mr. Hamon's thick nose wrinkled as he threw down the newspaper. Overnight he had asked Joan Carston to ride with him, and she had made the excuse that her favourite hack had gone lame. Stephens was not a thought reader, but he remembered hastily certain instructions he had received.

"Her ladyship didn't think she would be able to ride, but her horse had got over his lameness this morning."

"Humph!" said Mr. Hamon again.

He took a quill toothpick from his pocket and nibbled at it.

"Lady Joan told me that she had put somebody in one of the cottages on the estate—at least, she didn't tell me, but I heard her mention the fact to Lord Creith. Who is it?"

"I don't know, sir," said Stephens truthfully. "I believe it is a lady and her daughter . . . her ladyship met her in London and gave her the cottage for a holiday."

One corner of Hamon's mouth lifted.

"Being a philanthropist, eh?" he sneered.

Stephens could only wonder at the cool assurance of a man

who, a year before, had almost grovelled to the girl about whom he could now speak with such insolent familiarity.

Hamon walked slowly through the stone-flagged entrance hall into the open. There was no sign of Joan, and he guessed that if he asked Stephens which way Joan had gone, the man would either plead ignorance or lie. Hamon had no illusions as to his popularity.

If the girl was invisible to him, she saw him plainly enough from No Man's Hill, a black against the green of the lawn. She sat astride the old hunter she rode, looking thoughtfully toward the big, rambling house, her young face troubled, the clear grey of her eyes clouded with doubt. A slim, gracious figure, almost boyish in its outlines, she watched the black speck as it moved back to the house, and for a second a faint smile trembled at the corners of the red lips.

"Up, Toby!" She jerked the rein, disturbing the grazing horse, and set his head to the top of the hill. No Man's Hill had been disputed territory for centuries, and its right to be included within the boundaries of the adjoining estates had impoverished at least three generations of two families. The Creiths had fought their claim in the courts since 1735. The Talmers had indulged in litigation for fifty years, and in the end had died embittered and ruined. The owners of Wold House had gone the same way. Would the new owner of the Wold continue the bad work, Joan wondered? Somehow she thought he was too sensible. He had been two years in occupation and had not issued a writ, though his title deeds undoubtedly gave him that disastrous right.

Presently she stopped and, dismounting and letting the horse graze at will, she climbed the last sheer slope and came to the top. Mechanically she looked at the watch on her wrist. It was exactly eight o'clock. And then her eyes sought the bridle path that skirted the foot of the hill.

She need not have examined her watch. The man she was overlooking had ridden out of the copse at exactly this moment, day after day, month after month. A tall man who sat his horse easily and smoked a pipe as he rode.

She took the glasses from the case she carried and focussed

them. The scrutiny was inexcusable; Joan admitted the fault without hesitation. It was he; the lean, æsthetic face, the grey patch at the temples, the open-throated rough shirt. She could have drawn him, and had.

"Joan Carston, you are an unmaidenly and shameless woman," she said sternly. "Is this man anything to you? No! Are you enveloping him in a golden cloud of romance? Yes! Isn't it vulgar curiosity and the desire of youth for mystery that brings you here every morning to spy upon this middle-aged and harmless gentleman? Yes! And aren't you ashamed? No!"

The unconscious object of her interrogations was parallel with her now. In one hand he carried a thin, pliable riding whip with which he smoothed the horse's mane absently. Looking neither to left nor right, he passed on, and she watched him with a puzzled frown until he was out of sight.

Mr. James Lexington Morlake was as great a source of puzzlement to the people of the country as to himself. For two years he had been master of Wold House, and nothing was known of him except that he was apparently a rich man. He most certainly had no friends. The Vicar had called upon him soon after his arrival. He had been canvassed on behalf of local charities, and had responded handsomely, but he had declined every social invitation which would bring him into closer touch with his neighbours. He neither visited nor received. Judicious enquiries were set afoot; cook talked to cook, and parlourmaid to parlourmaid, and in the end he stood disappointingly revealed as a man whose life was exemplary, if a little erratic, for nobody could be certain whether he was at home at Wold or in London. Even to his servants he did not disclose his plan for the day or the week. This eccentricity was common property.

Joan Carston mounted her horse and rode down the hill toward the path the man had followed. When she came to the track she looked to her left in time to see the battered sombrero he wore disappearing in the dip that leads to the river.

"I'm a rash and indelicate female, Toby," she said, addressing the twitching ears of her horse. "I am without reserve or

proper pride, but oh! Toby, I'd give two paper pounds sterling—which is all I have in the world—to talk with him and be disillusioned!"

She sent her audience cantering along the road, turning off through the dilapidated gate which led her back to her father's estate. Where the main road skirted Creith Park was a lime-washed barn-like cottage, and to this she rode. A woman standing in the garden waved her hand as the girl approached. She was of middle age, slim and pretty, and she carried herself with a dignity which almost disguised the poverty of her attire.

"Good morning, Lady Joan. We reached here last night and found everything ready for us. It was lovely of you to take such trouble."

"What is work?" said Joan swinging herself to the ground. "Especially when somebody else does it? How is the interesting invalid, Mrs. Cornford?"

Mrs. Cornford smiled.

"I don't know. He doesn't arrive until to-night. You don't mind my having a boarder?"

"No," Joan shook her head. "I wonder you don't stay here permanently. Father said you might. Who is your boarder?"

Mrs. Cornford hesitated.

"He is a young man I am interested in. I ought to tell you that he is, or was, a dipsomaniac."

"Good heavens!" said the startled girl.

"I have tried to help him, and I think I have. He is a gentleman—it is rather tragic to see these cases, but at the Mission, where I help when I can spare the time, we see many. You are sure you won't mind?"

"Not a bit," laughed Joan, and the woman looked at her admiringly.

"You look pretty in riding things," nodded Mrs. Cornford approvingly.

"I look pretty in anything," said Joan calmly. "There is no sense in blinking facts: I *am* pretty! I can't help it any more than you can. I'm going to breakfast with you!"

"Yes, they are expecting me at Creith," said Joan, spreading marmalade thickly on her bread. "At least, our visitor expects

me. Father expects nothing but a miracle that will bring him a million without any effort on his part. The miracle has partly materialised."

Mrs. Cornford's eyes spoke her surprise.

"No, we're not rich," said Joan, answering the unspoken question; "we are of the impoverished nobility. If I were a man I should go to America and marry somebody very wealthy and live a cat and dog life until I was well and truly divorced. As I am a girl, I must marry a home-bred millionaire. Which I shall not do."

"But surely . . ." began Mrs. Cornford.

"The house, the estate, our London house, are, or were until a week ago, mortgaged. We are the poorest people in the county."

Joan's cool confession took the other's breath away.

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "It is rather terrible for you."

"It isn't a bit," said Joan. "Besides, everybody here is at poverty's door. Everybody except the mysterious Mr. Morlake, who is popularly credited with being a millionaire. But that is only because he doesn't discuss his mortgages. Everybody else does. We sit round one another's tables and talk foreclosures and interests and the price of corn and cattle disease, but mostly we talk about the loss the country will sustain when the improvident nobility are replaced by the thrifty democracy."

Mrs. Cornford was silent, her grave eyes searching the girl's face. Joan had known her a year. It was an advertisement which Mrs. Cornford had inserted in a London newspaper asking for needlework that had brought Joan to the dingy little suburban street where the woman earned sufficient to keep herself and her daughter by her quick and clever fingers.

"It is not easy to be poor," she said quietly, and Joan looked up.

"You've been rich," she said, nodding her head sagely. "I knew that. One of these days I'm going to ask you to tell me the grisly story—no, I won't! Yes, it's horrible to be poor, but more horrible to be rich—on terms. Do you know Mr. Morlake?"

The elder woman smiled.

"He is a local celebrity, isn't he? I should hardly know him, but he seems to exercise the imagination of the people hereabouts. The girl from the village whom you so kindly sent here to tidy the cottage told me about him. Is he a friend of yours?"

"He is a friend of nobody's," said Joan. "In fact, he is so unfriendly that he must be rich. I used to think that he was going to be my prince charming," she sighed dolefully.

"I wonder if you are really sad?" smiled the woman. "I wonder."

Joan's face was inscrutable.

"You wouldn't imagine that I had a grisly past too, would you?" she asked. "Remember that I am quite old—nearly twenty-three."

"I shouldn't imagine so," said Mrs. Cornford, amusement in her fine eyes.

"Or a terrible secret?"

"No, I shouldn't think that either." Mrs. Cornford shook her head.

Joan sighed again.

"I'll go back to my burden," she said.

The "burden" was walking in the long chestnut avenue when she overtook him.

"I'm glad you've come, Lady Joan," he said with ill-assumed heartiness. "I'm starving!"

Joan Carston wished she had waited an hour or two.

CHAPTER III

The Head of the Creiths

FERDINAND CARSTON, ninth Earl of Creith, was a thin, querulous man, whose dominant desire was a negative one. He did not want to be bothered. He had spent his life avoiding trouble,

and his deviations had led him into strange places. His "paper" was held by half a score of moneylenders, his mortgages were on the books of as many banks. He did not wish to be bothered by farm bailiffs and factors, or by tenant farmers. He could not be worried with the choice of his agents, and most of them did not bother to render him accurate accounts. From time to time he attempted to recover his heavy liabilities by daring speculations, and as he could not be troubled with the business of investigating their soundness, he usually returned to the well-worn path that led to the little moneylenders' offices that infest Sackville and Jermyn streets.

And then there came into his orbit a most obliging financier who handsomely accepted the task of settling with troublesome banks and clamouring Shylocks. Lord Creith was grateful. Deuced grateful. He sold the reversionary rights in the Creith estates, and not only discharged at one sweep all his liabilities, but touched real money.

He was in his library, examining with interest Tattersall's Sale Catalogue, when his guest came in unannounced.

"Hullo, Hamon!" he said without any great geniality. "Had breakfast?"

"Joan had breakfast out," said Hamon curtly.

"*Did* she?" asked Creith, looking at him over his glasses and at a loss to continue, yet feeling that something was expected of him he added: "*Did* she?"

Hamon pulled up a chair and seated himself at the opposite side of the writing-table.

"Have you ever thought what will happen when you die?" he asked.

Lord Creith blinked quickly.

"Never thought of it, Hamon, never thought of it. I've been a good churchman, though the tithes are an infernal nuisance —I suppose I'll go up to heaven with the best of 'em."

"I'm not thinking about your spiritual future," said Mr. Hamon. "I'm thinking about Creith."

"The title goes to Joan—it descends that way in our family," said his lordship, biting the end of a pen-holder. "But why bother me about these details, my dear fellow? If Joan wants

to preserve the estate she'll marry you, and I've no objection. We've had some devilish queer people in our family before, and I daresay we shall go on having devilish queer people. My great great grandmother had a wooden leg."

Mr. Ralph Hamon overlooked the uncomplimentary reference, and was not prepared to encourage a discussion on the deficiencies of Lord Creith's ancestors.

"If Joan doesn't want to marry me?" he said. "I suppose you've some influence?"

Lord Creith took off his glasses deliberately.

"With Joan? Bless your life, she doesn't take the slightest notice of anything I say! And very properly. I'm about the worst adviser that anybody could have. She'll do what she likes. Her dear and blessed mother was the same. Don't bother me now, my dear good fellow."

"But suppose Joan refuses me point blank?" persisted the other.

Lord Creith's smile was broad and bland.

"Then, my dear boy, you're finished!"

Hamon bit off the end of a cigar deliberately, as Lord Creith looked significantly at the door.

"You *must* have some influence, Creith," he said doggedly. "Talk to her."

The older man leaned back in his chair, obviously bored, as obviously resigned to boredom.

"I'll speak to her," he said. "Oh, by the way, that farm you wanted, you can't have. I find that the mortgage was foreclosed by the Midland Bank a month ago, and the property has been sold to that queer fish, James Lexington Morlake. Though why the dickens he wants it——"

"Morlake!"

Creith looked up in surprise. The sallow face of Mr. Ralph Hamon was puckered, his slit of a mouth was parted in amazement and anger.

"Morlake—no—James Lexington Morlake? Does he live near here? Is he the man you were talking about the other day—you said he was an American. . . ."

He fired the questions in rapid succession, and Lord Creith closed his eyes wearily.

"I don't know who he is . . . though I mentioned his name —what is the matter with you, Hamon?"

"Nothing," said the other harshly, "only——" He turned the subject. "Will you speak to Joan?" he asked curtly, and stalked out of the library.

Joan was in her room when the maid came for her, and short as was the space of time elapsing between the summons and the answering, Lord Creith was again absorbed in his catalogue.

"Oh, Joan . . . yes, I wanted to see you about something. Yes, yes, I remember. Be as civil as you can to Hamon, my dear."

"Has he been complaining?"

"Good Lord, no!" said Lord Creith. "Only he has an idea that he would like to marry you. I don't know how you feel about it?"

"Do you wish me to tell you?" she asked, and his lordship shook his head vigorously.

"I don't think so—not if it's going to bother me. Of course, you know I've sold everything . . . house, land and the place in London?"

"To Mr. Hamon?"

He nodded.

"Everything," he said. "If you don't marry him, there will only be the bit of money I have when I—er—step off, if you forgive the vulgarity."

"I gathered that," she said.

"Of course, your grandmother's money comes to you when you are twenty-four. Happily, I haven't been able to touch that, though I tried very hard—very hard! But those lawyers are cute fellows, deuced cute! Now what about marrying this fellow Hamon?"

She smiled.

"I thought you wouldn't," said her father with satisfaction. "That is all I wanted you for . . . oh, yes, do you know this man Morlake?"

If he had been looking at her he would have been startled

by the pink flush that came to her face. But his eyes were already on the catalogue.

"Why?"

"I mentioned his name to Hamon—never saw a man get more annoyed. What *is* Morlake?"

"A man," she said laconically.

"How interesting!" said his lordship, and returned to his sale list.

CHAPTER IV

A Caller at Wold House

JAMES MORLAKE sat in the shade of the big cedar that grew half way between his house and the river. His lame fox-terrier sprawled at his feet, and a newspaper lay open on his knees. He was not reading; his eyes were fixed on the glassy surface of the stream. A splash, a momentary vision of wet silver as a trout leapt at an incautious fly, brought his head round, and then he saw the man that stood surveying him from the drive.

One glance he gave, and then returned to the placid contemplation of the little river.

Hamon walked slowly forward, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"Well," he said, "it is a long time since I saw you. I didn't know that you were living around here."

Jim Morlake raised his eyes and yawned.

"I should have sent you a card," he said lazily. "One ought to have 'at home' days. If I had known you were coming this morning, I'd have hired the village band and put up a few flags."

Mr. Hamon pulled forward a chair and sat down squarely before the other, and when he spoke, it was with the greatest deliberation.

"I'll buy this house from you—Morlake——"

"*Mister* Morlake," murmured the other. "Let us remember that we are gentlemen."

"I'll buy this house from you and you can go abroad. I'll forgive your threats and your mad fool talk about . . . well, you know—but you will get out of the country in a week."

Morlake laughed softly, and Hamon, who had never seen him laugh, was astounded at the transformation that laughter brought to the sombre face.

"You are a most amusing person," said the tall man. "You drop from the clouds, or spout out from the eternal fires after an absence of years, and immediately start in to rearrange my life! You're getting fat, Hamon, and those bags under your eyes aren't pretty. You ought to see a doctor."

Hamon leant forward.

"Suppose I tell your neighbours who you are!" he asked slowly. "Suppose I go to the police and tell them that *Mister* Morlake"—he laid a sneering emphasis on the title—"is a cheap Yankee crook!"

"Not cheap," murmured Morlake, his amused eyes watching the other.

"Suppose I tell them that I once caught you red-handed robbing the Prescott Bank, and that you blackmailed me into letting you go!"

Morlake's eyes never left the man's face.

"There has been a series of burglaries committed in London," Hamon went on. "They've been worked by a man called The Black—ever heard of him?"

Morlake smiled.

"I never read the newspapers," he drawled. "There is so much in them that is not fit for a country gentleman to read."

"A country gentleman!"

It was Mr. Hamon's turn to be amused. Putting his hand in his pocket, he withdrew a note-case, and, opening its worn flap, he pulled out a tight wad of banknotes.

"That is for your travelling expenses," he said, as Morlake took the money from his hand. "As for your little house and estate, I'll make you an offer to-morrow. Your price——"

"Is a hundred thousand," said Morlake. "I'd take this paltry sum on account if it wasn't for the fact that you've got the number of every note in your pocket-book and a busy detective waiting at the gate to pull me as soon as I pocketed the swag! A hundred thousand is my price, Hamon. Pay me that, in the way I want it paid, and I'll leave you alone. One hundred thousand sterling is the price you pay for a month of quietness!"

He threw the money on to the grass.

"A month—what do you mean, a month?"

Again the big man raised his quiet eyes.

"I mean the month that elapses in this country between trial and execution," he said.

CHAPTER V

The Monkey and the Gourd

RALPH HAMON leapt to his feet as if he had been shot. His face was livid, his thick lips bloodless.

"You're a liar . . . a damned Yankee crook! Hang me? I'll settle with you, Morlake! I know enough about you. . . ."

Morlake raised a hand in mock alarm.

"Don't frighten me! My nerves are not what they were. And be a sensible man. Tell me all about yourself. I hear that you cleared half a million in Varoni Diamonds. Honestly too; which is queer. If you had only waited, Hamon! You wouldn't be going about in fear of your life. Do you know how the natives catch monkeys? They put a plum or a date at the bottom of a narrow-necked gourd. And the monkey puts in his hand and grips the date but can't get his clenched first through the narrow neck. He is too greedy to loose hold of the date and hasn't the strength to smash the gourd. And so he's caught. You're a monkey man, Hamon!"

Hamon had mastered his rage, but his face was deadly white.

"I don't understand you," he said. "You're one of these clever Alecs who like to hear themselves talk. I've warned you. Maybe you're the gourd that is going to get smashed."

"That occurred to me," nodded the other, "but I shall be broken in a good cause. In the meantime, I shall stay at Wold House, rejoicing in my mystery and in the interest I inspire in the country bosom."

"I'll settle that mystery!" roared Hamon. He paused at the edge of the gravel path and raised an admonitory finger. "I give you seven days to clear," he said.

"Shut the gate as you go out," said James Morlake, not troubling to turn his head.

Hamon sprang into the car that he had left on the road and drove homeward in a savage mood; but the shocks of the day were not at an end.

He had to follow the main road before he reached the uneven lane that bordered the Creith estate. It was the Hamon estate now, he reflected with satisfaction. He was master of these broad acres and sleepy farms that nestled in the folds of the downs. But his mastership was incomplete unless there went with his holding the slim, straight girl whose antagonism he sensed, whose unspoken contempt cut like the lash of a whip.

To tame her, humble her, punish her for her insolence, would be a sport more satisfying than any he had followed in his chequered life. As for the man called James Morlake . . . he winced as he thought of that almost exact counterpart to Joan Carston.

He had turned the bonnet of his car into the lane when his eyes rested upon the whitewashed cottage behind the wooden fence, and he stopped the machine. He remembered that a friend of Joan's had been installed here—a woman.

Ralph Hamon was an opportunist. A friend of Joan's might become a friend of his, and if, as he guessed, she was not too well blessed with the goods of this world, he might find a subterranean method of sapping the girl's prejudice against him.

He got down from the machine and walked back to the road and through the gateway. A red brick path flanked by tall dahlias led to the cottage door. He glanced left and right. The occupant was not in the garden, and he knocked. Almost immediately the door opened and the tall figure of a woman confronted him.

Their eyes met, and neither spoke. He was staring at her as if she were a visitant from another world, and she met his gaze unflinchingly.

He tried to speak, but nothing came from his throat but a slurred growl; and then, turning violently, he almost ran down the path; the perspiration rolling down his face, his mouth dry with fear; for Elsa Cornford had that half of his secret which the master of Wold House did not guess.

CHAPTER VI

Hamon Tells His News

"WASN'T that thunder?" asked Lord Creith, and raised his hand to hide a yawn.

Joan sympathised with his boredom, for the dinner had seemed interminable.

"Sounds like it," said Hamon, rousing himself with a start from an unpleasant reverie.

The three people had scarcely spoken through the meal. Once Lord Creith had made a pointed reference to the dullness of the country and the fun that a man of Ralph Hamon's quality could find in town, but the financier had ignored his opportunity.

"It *is* thunder," said Creith with satisfaction. "October is rather late for storms. I remember when I was a boy . . ."

He made a feeble effort to galvanise the little party into an

interest which they did not feel, and ended his reminiscence almost before it had begun. And then, unconsciously, he turned the conversation to a channel which made two pairs of eyes turn instantly to his.

"I've been asking Stephens about this fellow Morlake. Queer fish—very queer. Nobody knows the least thing about him. He came from nowhere three years ago, bought up Wold House and settled himself as a country gentleman. He doesn't hunt or dance, refuses every invitation that has been sent to him, and apparently has no friends. A queer devil."

"I should say he was!"

Joan heard Mr. Hamon's loud chuckle of laughter, and looked across at him in surprise.

"Do you know him?"

Mr. Hamon selected a cigarette from the box on the table before he answered.

"Yes, I know him. He is an American crook."

"What!"

Joan tried to suppress the indignation in her voice, but failed, and apparently the man did not notice the implied defence of the master of Wold House.

"Yes," said Mr. Hamon, enjoying the sensation he had created, "he's a crook. What his real name is, I don't know. He is one of the big men of the underworld, a cracksman and a blackmailer!"

"But surely the police know all about him?" said the amazed Creith.

"They may. But a man like Morlake, who has made a lot of money, would be able to keep the police 'straight.'"

Joan had listened speechless.

"How do you know?" she found her voice to demand. Hamon shrugged his shoulders.

"I had an encounter with him a few years ago. He thought that he had found something about me which gave him a pull. He tried to blackmail me, and he had a narrow escape. He won't be so fortunate next time, and the next time"—he opened and closed his hand suggestively—"is near at hand! I've got him like this!"

Joan sat stunned by the news. Why this revelation should so affect her she could not explain, even to herself. She hated Ralph Hamon at that moment—hated him with an intensity out of all proportion to his offence, real or imaginary. It required the exercise of every scrap of self-control to prevent her anger bursting forth, but that she exercised and listened, biting her lip.

"His real name I don't know," Mr. Hamon went on. "The police have had him under observation for years, but they have never been able to collect evidence to convict him."

"But I never knew of this," interrupted Lord Creith, "and I am a magistrate. The county police invariably speak well of him."

"When I said 'police' I meant headquarters," corrected Hamon. "Anyway, they are not the kind of people who would talk."

"I don't believe it!" Joan's pent-up indignation came forth in a rush. "It is an absurd story! Really, Mr. Hamon, I am beginning to suspect you of reading sensational stories!"

Hamon smiled.

"I admit that it sounds unreal," he said, "but there is the truth. I saw the man this morning."

"Mr. Morlake?" asked Joan in surprise, and he nodded.

"He was pretty uncomfortable when he saw me, I can tell you, and to know that he had been recognised. He begged me not to tell anybody——"

"That isn't true. Of course, it isn't true," said Joan scornfully, and Hamon went a dull red. "Mr. Morlake is the last man in the world who would beg anything from you or anybody else. I don't believe he's a thief."

"A friend of yours?" asked Hamon loudly.

"I've never met him," said Joan shortly. "I have seen him . . . at a distance, and that is all."

There was an awkward silence, but Ralph Hamon was blessed with a thick skin, and although he had been given the lie direct, he was not particularly disconcerted, not even when, attempting to resume the discussion of Morlake's past, Joan brusquely turned the talk into another direction. When Lord

Creith had gone to his room, she walked out of the house to the lawn, to watch the lightning flickering in the southern sky, and to think free of Hamon's stifling presence, but he followed her.

"It looks as though it will be a stormy night," he said, by way of making conversation, and she agreed, and was turning back to the house when he stopped her. "Where did you find that woman who's living in the gardener's cottage?" he asked.

She raised her brows in astonishment. It was the last question in the world she expected from him.

"You mean Mrs. Cornford? Why—is she a criminal too?" she asked.

He smiled indulgently at the sarcasm.

"Not exactly; only I am interested. I have an idea that I met her years ago. I suppose she knows me, doesn't she?" he asked carelessly.

"She has never mentioned your name, possibly because I have never spoken about you," she said, a little surprised and her curiosity piqued.

"I seem to remember that she was a little wrong in the head. She was in a lunatic asylum for twelve months."

The girl was surprised into laughing.

"Really, Mr. Hamon," she said dryly, "I begin to suspect you of trying to frighten me. Such of my friends as aren't criminals must be lunatics!"

"I didn't know he was a friend of yours," said Hamon quickly.

He went toward her in the darkness.

"I have already told you that Mr. Morlake is not a friend. He's a neighbour, and neighbours, by our convention, are friends until we discover they are otherwise. Shall we go in?"

"One moment."

He caught her by the arm, and gently she freed herself.

"That isn't necessary, Mr. Hamon. What do you want to tell me?"

"Has your father spoken to you?" he asked.

"My father frequently speaks to me," said the girl. "Do you mean about you?"

He nodded.

"About your wanting to marry me?"

"That's it," he said a little huskily.

"Yes, he did speak about it to me," said Joan steadily, "and I told him that, whilst I was very sensible of the compliment you paid me, I have no desire to marry you."

Hamon cleared his voice.

"Did he also mention the fact that I am virtually the owner of Creith?"

"He also mentioned that," said the girl bravely.

"I suppose Creith is very dear to you? Your ancestors have had it for hundreds of years?"

"Very dear, indeed," said Joan, stifling her anger, "but not so dear that I am prepared to sacrifice my life's happiness to retain the title of mistress of Creith. There are worse things than being homeless, Mr. Hamon."

She made a move to go, but again he restrained her.

"Wait," he said. His voice was low and vibrant. "Joan, I am twenty years older than you, but you're the sort of woman I have dreamt about since I was a boy. There isn't a thing I wouldn't do for you, there isn't a service I wouldn't render you. I want you!"

Before she realised what he was doing he had caught her in his arms. She struggled to escape, but he held her in a grip that could not be broken.

"Let me go—how dare you!"

"Listen!" He almost hissed the word. "I love you, Joan! I love you, although you hurt me with your damned contempt. I love your face, your eyes, your dear, slim body. . . ."

She twisted her head aside to avoid his greedy lips. And then, from the hallway, she heard, with a gasp of relief, the voice of her father calling:

"Where are you, Joan?"

Hamon's arms dropped, and she staggered back, breathless and shaken, horror and disgust in her soul.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

She could not speak; she could only point to the door, and he

went in. She herself did not follow for some minutes, and Lord Creith peered at her short-sightedly.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, as he saw her pale face.

"Nothing, Daddy."

He looked round. Hamon had disappeared through the open door of the drawing-room.

"A primitive fellow. I'll kick him out if you say the word, my dear."

Again she shook her head.

"It's not necessary. Yes, he is a little primitive. If he doesn't go to-morrow, will you take me to London?"

"I'm going to London anyway," said his lordship with satisfaction. "Do you wish me to talk to Hamon?" he asked anxiously.

"It isn't necessary," said Joan, and Lord Creith went back to his study relieved, for he hated any kind of bother.

CHAPTER VII

Into the Storm

SHE went straight up to her room, resolved not to risk a further interview with the man in whose eyes, even in the failing light, she had read the very deeps of human passion. She felt physically sick as she recalled those horrible seconds on the lawn, and she searched the drawer of her bureau for the key of the bedroom door, and, finding it, turned the lock—a thing she had never done before in her life. Then she sat down before her mirror, calmly to review a disturbing evening.

Predominant of the emotions which the night had called forth was the shock of the discovery about James Morlake. It could not be true; and yet Hamon would not have framed such an accusation unless it was well based.

She got up from her chair, opened one of the long windows and stepped out on to the stone balcony above the porch. The

lightning was flickering whitely in the sky; there came to her ears the low roll and sustained rumble of thunder; but it was not at the sable skies she was looking. Across the park one faint yellow light showed the position of Wold House.

If all that Hamon said were true, did this strangely isolated man know that he was suspected? Ought he to be told? She uttered a little exclamation of impatience. It was madness on her part, sheer, stark lunacy to think about him. She knew him only as a figure that had often come within the focus of her field-glasses, a remarkable, an attractive face around which she had woven all manner of dreams. Nearer at hand, she would be disillusioned; and just at that moment she particularly desired that, even though she hated Hamon for sowing the first seeds of disenchantment.

She had never spoken to Morlake, never been within fifty yards of him, knew no more than servants' gossip could tell her, or than she could imagine for herself. If Hamon had spoken the truth, then he was in danger. If it were not true, then, for his own purpose, the financier was hatching some plot which would lead to Morlake's undoing.

She came back to the room and stared at herself in the mirror.

"I must be disillusioned," she said slowly and deliberately, and knew, as she spoke, that she was deceiving herself.

She went to her bureau, took out a long raincoat and a little hat, and laid them on her bed.

Creith House retired early, but it was not till half-past ten that she heard the front door being locked by Stephens, and the surly voice of Mr. Hamon bid the servant good-night as he came up the stairs on the way to his own room. She listened and heard the thud of Hamon's bedroom door as it closed. A quarter-of-an-hour passed and the house was silent.

Once more she returned to the balcony. The light was burning at Wold House, and she made her sudden resolve. With the coat over her arm, and holding her hat in her hand, she unlocked the door and stole fearfully down the broad stairway to the hall, where a night-light burnt. Stephens had retired; she could hear only the ticking of the big clock in the hall.

The key of the front door hung on the wall, a big and ungainly article, and she put this into her bag before she pulled back the bolts gently, unlocked the door and closed it behind her.

There would be no difficulty in finding her way. The lightning snickered and flashed almost incessantly. With a wildly beating heart she passed down the drive under the shadow of the rustling chestnut trees, through the lodge gates on to the main road.

She was being a fool, a sentimental idiot . . . she was behaving like a romantic school-girl. Reason put out a hundred hands to hold her back. Something which was neither reason nor sentiment, some great instinct more potent than any controlling force of mind or heart, sent her forward eagerly to her strange quest.

Once she shrank into the shelter of a hedge as a car flashed past, and she wondered what the neighbours would think if they had seen Lady Joan Carston hiding from observation at that hour of the night. At any rate, they would never dream that she was on her way to warn an American crook whom she did not know, and had never met, that his arrest was imminent. She reflected on this with a certain amount of grim amusement.

Presently she was walking in the shelter of the high red-brick wall that surrounded Wold House. The wrought-iron gates were closed, and she had to fumble for some time before she found the latch that admitted her. The light she had seen had disappeared; the house was in darkness, and she stood in the shadow of a tree, trying to summon up sufficient courage to go on with her self-appointed mission.

She had taken a step forward when unexpectedly the door of the house opened. A bright light glowed in the passage, and in its rays she saw silhouetted in the doorway the figure of a man, and she drew back again to the cover of the shadow. Behind the man she saw James Morlake. He was talking in a low voice, and, even from where she stood, she felt a little thrill of satisfaction that it was the voice of a gentleman.

But who was the other? In some indefinite way the figure was strangely familiar to Joan. And then:

"Feeling better now?"

"Yes, thanks." She had to guess what the mumbled reply was.

"You will find the cottage on the road. I don't know Mrs. Cornford, but I believe there is a lady staying there."

"Awfully foolish of me to come here, but I went to the station bar . . . and time passed . . . and then this beastly storm came on. I'm afraid I'm rather drunk."

"I'm afraid you are," said Jim Morlake's voice.

Mrs. Cornford's lodger! The dipsomaniac. They came down the steps together, the younger man reeling a little till Jim put out his hand and steadied him.

"Awfully obliged to you, I'm sure—my name is Farringdon—Ferdie Farringdon. . . ."

And then a flicker of lightning showed his face, white, haggard, unshaven. The girl shrank back, wild-eyed, biting her lip to arrest her scream. Gripping a bough of the laurel bush to hold herself erect, she watched them pass into the gloom. She was still standing motionless, frozen, when Jim returned alone.

She watched him go into the house, saw the door close, and still she waited. Great drops of rain were splashing down; the thunder was louder, the lightning more vivid.

She had no longer any thought of warning him. She was absorbed, transfixed by the ghost that had risen from the night. With an effort she stirred herself and ran down the drive.

She tried to open the gate, but to her horror it was steadfast. Morlake must have locked it after he had seen the other on his way. What should she do?

She moved stealthily across the lawn, but here the river barred her further movement. She could get over the wall if she knew where a ladder was to be found.

And then the front door opened again and she drew swiftly into the shadows as somebody came out. It was Morlake: she could not mistake him. He walked quickly down the path, and she heard the clang of the gate as it closed behind him. As soon

as the sound of his footsteps had died down, she ran to the gate—it was unlocked, and, with a sigh of thankfulness, she passed through.

Which way had he gone, she wondered. Probably toward the village. It was hardly likely that any business would take him in the direction of Creith House, unless he was going to the cottage to make sure that Farringdon had returned.

She had not gone a dozen yards before she was wet through, for the rain was hissing down with torrential fury. The roar and crash of thunder deafened her, the everlasting flutter of blue lightning brought intervals of blindness between each flash. Up to this moment she had not been afraid, but now the terror of the storm came on her and she broke into a run, and at last came in sight of the lodge gates. She felt in her sodden bag for the key—Yes, it was there.

Quickly she passed up the avenue and had reached the end, when she stopped dead, her eyes wide open in fear. Ahead of her, not a dozen yards away, the lightning revealed the figure of a man in black, standing motionless and in her path. She could not see the face under the brim of the wide sombrero he wore.

"Who are you?" she asked shakily.

Before he could reply, there was a blinding burst of flame, a crash as though giant hands had torn a sheet of steel apart; something lifted her from her feet and flung her violently to the earth.

The man in the path stood paralysed for a second, then, with a cry, he leapt forward, and, lifting the prostrate figure, dragged her from the burning tree. A light had appeared in one of the windows of Creith House, another followed. The household was awake, and the blazing chestnut would bring them into the open.

He looked round and saw a clump of rhododendrons, and lifting the unconscious girl he carried her into the shadow of the cover just as the butler came out of the house to the porch.

Who she was the stranger did not know. Possibly some belated servant returning from the village. He did not trouble to examine his burden, and might have been no wiser if he had,

for Joan's face was smeared with the soft loam mud into which she had mercifully fallen.

Evidently nobody intended coming out to fight the flames. He heard a voice from one of the windows demanding that the fire brigade be sent for.

"'Phone, my dear man, 'phone! And don't bother me till the beastly fire is out."

It was at that moment that Joan recovered consciousness. She opened her eyes and stared wildly round. Somebody was supporting her head on his knee. Her face was wet with falling rain; above her were the swaying branches of bushes. How did she get there?

"I think you'll be O. K. now," said a voice, strangely muffled.

She stared up at him, recognising instantly the voice of James Morlake.

"What has happened?" she asked, and then she smelt the pungent perfume of burnt wood and shivered.

The tree under which she had stood had been struck, and by some miracle she had escaped.

"Thank you ever so much——" she began, and at that moment the lawn was made radiant with a sustained glare of lightning.

She was looking into a face that was covered from brow to chin with a black silk mask!

CHAPTER VIII

The Robber

"It is true—true!" she grasped, and he heard the pain in her voice and peered down.

"What is true?—please don't shout or they will hear you."

Trembling helplessly, she tried to regain control of her voice.

"You *are* a burglar!" she said, and heard his smothered exclamation.

"You mean . . . the mask? I'm afraid you saw it. One mask

doesn't make a burglar, you know, any more than one swallow makes a summer! On a wet night like this a man who wishes to keep that school-girl complexion would naturally protect——"

"Please don't be absurd!"

She realised, so keen was her sense of humour, that the dignity of her tone did not exactly accord with her own deplorable situation. She was lying uncomfortably on wet grass, her face. . . . She hoped he could not see her face, and furtively wiped some of the mud away with the slimy corner of her raincoat, which, for some extraordinary reason, she had carried over her arm through the storm.

"Will you help me up, please?"

For answer he stooped and lifted her to her feet without any apparent effort.

"Are you staying at the Hall?" he asked, and there was something so formal and so suggestive of polite small talk about the question that her lips trembled.

"Yes—I am. Are you . . . were you thinking of burgling the Hall?"

She felt rather than heard him laugh.

"You won't believe that I am not a burglar——"

"Are you?"

There was a challenge in the voice.

"Really," said James Morlake after a while, "this situation is verging on the grotesque. . . ."

"Are you?" she asked again, and as she expected, so he replied.

"I am."

She would have been bitterly disappointed if he had said anything else. A burglar he might be, a liar he could not be.

"Well, we've nothing to burgle, Mr——" She stopped suddenly. Did he know that she had recognised him?

"Mr.——?" he suggested. "You said just now 'It is true' —meaning it was true that I am a burglar. Were you expecting a visitation to-night?"

"Yes," she said, having none of his scruples. "Mr. Hamon said that we might be robbed."

It was the lamest of inventions, but the effect upon the man was unexpected.

"Oh! You're a visitor at the Hall. I beg your pardon, I thought you were . . . er . . . well, I didn't exactly know what you were—would you mind looking straight at the house?"

"Why?"

"Please——"

She obeyed naturally and turned her back on him. Somebody was coming out to the smouldering tree. A storm lantern was swaying and the gait of the newcomer suggested a reluctance to investigate at close hand the phenomena of nature.

"It is Peters," she said, and looked round.

She was alone; the masked man was gone.

It was easy to avoid Peters, but as she reached the corridor leading to her room, she suddenly confronted her father.

"Good God! Joan . . . where on earth have *you* been . . . you gave me a fright."

"I went out to see the tree," she said (she had never lied so easily in her life).

"What the deuce do you want to go out into the beastly rain to see trees for?" grumbled Lord Creith. "Let Peters see it! Your face is all muddy. . . ."

She bolted into her room as the door of Hamon's chamber opened and his pyjamaed figure showed.

"Something struck?" asked Hamon.

Lord Creith turned his head.

"One of your trees, my dear fellow," he said with satisfaction. "By Jove! I only just realised that it wasn't my tree!"

And, consoled by the knowledge that there really was nothing to justify any personal worry, his lordship went back to bed, undisturbed by the cannon of the heavens or the lightning which lit up his room at irregular intervals.

Joan's was the only room in Creith Hall that possessed the luxury of an adjoining bathroom, and she was sufficiently feminine, as she stripped off her wet clothes, to be absorbed for the moment in the thoroughness of her soaking to the partial exclusion of all thoughts of her adventure.

She came back to the problem of Mr. Morlake as she sat

in bed nursing her knees and watching through the open window the passage of the storm. The chestnut tree was smoking and the lightning gave her a glimpse of two brass-helmetted men gazing impotently at the ruin. The village fire brigade was, in point of costume, an exact replica of its great metropolitan model. It was only on the minor point of efficiency that it fell short.

Had Morlake recognised her? It was very doubtful. She had never met him, and she guessed that he was so incurious as to the identities of the people of Creith House that he was genuine when he mistook her for a visitor. Who did he think she was? A servant, perhaps.

"Now I think you are thoroughly and completely disillusioned, Joan Carston," she said soberly. "Your wonder-man is a burglar! And you can only be interested in burglars if your mind is morbid and unwholesome and your outlook is hopelessly decadent. Let this be a lesson to you, young woman! Concentrate upon the normalities of life."

So saying, she got out of bed, and, craning her neck, looked across the park toward Wold House. The tiny light was burning. Mr. Morlake had returned home.

Sighing thankfully, she returned to bed, and she was sleeping soundly when James Morlake stepped from the concealment of the rhododendrons and, crossing the lawn, slipped the edge of a small jemmy under the bottom of a window that looked into the dark entrance hall.

CHAPTER IX

Mr. Hamon Loses Money

JOAN came down early, intending to breakfast before Mr. Hamon was up. She had nearly finished her healthy repast when Hamon burst into the room, and he was not pretty to see. He wore his socks, a pair of trousers from which the braces

were hanging, and a vividly striped pyjama coat. His unshaven face was dark with anger as he glared round.

"Where's Stephens?" he roared, and then, realising that neither his tone nor appearance was in harmony with the requirements of good breeding, he said in a more subdued voice: "Excuse me, Lady Joan, but I've been robbed."

She had risen to her feet and was looking at him, wide-eyed.

"Has somebody stolen your shoes and coat?" she asked, and he flushed.

"I only just discovered it—the robbery, I mean. Somebody broke into my room last night and took a wallet with three thousand pounds! It was that dog Morlake. I'll fix him! I've given the swine his chance——"

"It is a pity that the robber did not also steal your vocabulary, Mr. Hamon," said the girl coldly.

She was far from feeling the indifference she displayed. Then Morlake had come back after all! She felt a sense of grievance against him—he had deceived her. She examined her mind, after the spluttering Hamon had disappeared, in search of a more sympathetic audience, for some intelligent reason for her grievance. The deception lay in the light which showed in the window of Wold House, she decided, though James Morlake might not have been responsible for its appearance. From the confusing evidence offered by the victim, by Peters, and reflected by Lord Creith, it appeared that, at some hour in the early morning, a person unknown had forced an entrance through one of the windows which flanked the hall door; that he had entered at least two rooms (Joan gasped as the possibility flashed across her mind that hers might have been one, and was unaccountably piqued to learn that the second room was an empty room next to Mr. Hamon's); that he had taken, from underneath the pillow which supported the unconscious head of Ralph Hamon, a leather wallet containing between £3,000 and £4,000 in banknotes, and added the indignity of unloading the revolver which lay on a table by the side of Mr. Hamon's bed; the cartridges were discovered in the grounds.

"My dear good man," said Lord Creith, visibly bored by the fourth recital of Ralph Hamon's loss, "it is a simple matter to convey to the bovine constabulary which is at present tramping over my flower beds that you suspect this Morlake person. As a magistrate, I shall be happy to issue a warrant for his arrest, or, what is more important, the search of his house. If he has stolen your money, it will be discovered in his possession."

"I don't want to do that," said Hamon, sourly. "There is no proof other than my word."

"But I thought you said that the police had him under observation?" Joan ventured to say, though at the thought that she was assisting in the arrest of her burglar she went hot and cold.

"Not exactly under observation," admitted Hamon; "but there are men who know about him—men at headquarters, I mean. My friend, Inspector Marborne, has been shadowing him for years. No, I'm not going to hand the case over to the local police—they'd only bungle it. Besides, a man of Morlake's character is too clever to have the stuff in the house. I'll go over and talk to him."

He looked savagely across at the girl as the sound of her soft laughter came to him.

"I'm so sorry," she said apologetically, "but it does sound silly, doesn't it, for the robbed to argue with the robber? I know such things happen in books, but you don't seriously mean that you will go to him and tell him you suspect him?"

"I think all this talk about our neighbour is romantic nonsense," said Lord Creith, energising himself to take an interest in the matter. "The whole thing is so simple: if he's a burglar, and you know he's a burglar, have him arrested. If he doesn't happen to be a burglar, but is an innocent country gentleman, as we are all agreed he seems to be, then, of course, you're liable to very severe damages in any action at law which he may bring. Anyway, it was foolish of you to carry so much money about with you, my dear man! Three thousand pounds! Great heavens! What are banks for?" he looked at his watch. "I am going up to town in half-an-hour. I won't offer you a

lift, because my machine can only hold two people comfortably in ordinary circumstances and one person, uncomfortably, when Joan is travelling. My dear, will you try to keep your baggage down to half-a-dozen trunks and as few hat-boxes as possible?"

"You're going to town?" said the other, disappointed. "I thought you were staying for the rest of the week."

"I told you on Monday I was going to town," said his lordship, who had done nothing of the sort. "There is a sale at Tattersall's to-morrow which I must attend; and Joan has an appointment with her dentist. You may stay on if you wish; don't let me interefere with your plans."

"When will you be back?" asked Hamon.

"In about a month," said Lord Creith.

Ralph Hamon decided that he also would go to the metropolis, and hinted that his own car was big enough to take the whole party. The hint was neither seen nor heeded.

"That's over," said Lord Creith, with a sigh of relief, as the car turned out of the lodge gates to the post road. "Hamon is a very admirable person, but he's inclined to get on one's nerves."

He screwed an eyeglass in his eye as they approached Wold House.

"That is the home of our maligned neighbour, isn't it, Joan? Never seen the fellow: what is he like?"

"Oh, just an ordinary, inoffensive-looking man," said Joan lamely.

"Is he now?" said his lordship, interested. "That is very suspicious. I never like inoffensive-looking men."

At that moment the chauffeur jammed on his brakes. A car was coming out through the gates of Wold House, a long, black machine, the sole occupant of which was Mr. James Morlake. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the danger and brought his machine perilously close to the ditch on his left as Lord Creith's car shot past.

"Narrow squeak, that," said his lordship comfortably. "Our man was, of course, in the wrong: he should have sounded his horn. So that is Mr. Morlake, eh? I don't agree with your

description, my dear. A more offensive-looking person I have never seen. From the scowl on his face he might have been a murderer."

"I was talking of him as a man," said Joan calmly, "not as a motorist."

A savage howl from a siren behind brought the Creith car to the near side of the road, and the snaky black machine shot past them, its driver looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Joan knew the type of car: it was a high-powered Italian machine, and one of the costliest in Europe. Evidently Mr. James Morlake spared no expense in the pursuit of his nefarious calling.

CHAPTER X

The Frame-up

Divisional Inspector Marborne came from his chief's office, closed the door behind him gently, and was whistling to himself as he walked down the stone stairs of police headquarters. Even his friend and associate, a detective sergeant of many years' standing, was deceived.

He followed his superior into the street, and in the comparative quietude of the Thames Embankment, asked eagerly:

"Was it O. K.?"

"It was *not* O. K.," said the other carefully. "It was as near O. K. as makes no difference. In fact, Barney, the Pure Police movement has spread so thoroughly that I was as near to being asked to turn in my coat as ever I've been. The old man said that he had proof that I'd been taking 'quieteners' from Bolson's gambling house in Upper Gloucester Place, and gave me the number of the notes that Big Bennett paid me for tipping off his brother that he was going to be 'pulled in.' I'm booked for retirement, and so are you—the old man said he knew that you were in it."

Sergeant Barney Slone winced, for he had tastes which would make living on a pension a painful proceeding.

"There is one chance, and only one, and I'm going to take it," said the inspector. "I hate depending upon men like Lieber and Colley, but they are our long suits. Bring them up to my apartment for a bit of dinner to-night."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get The Black," said Inspector Marborne, and his subordinate stopped in his walk and stared at him.

"Get him—how?" he asked incredulously.

But the inspector was not prepared to explain.

"I know him—at least, I think I know him—if I don't, a friend of mine does. It will be the biggest thing I've ever done, Barney."

For more than five years The Black, so called because he wore clothing of funereal hue, had been the bugbear of London. No strong room was invulnerable to the attack of this skilful and single-handed burglar. Banks and safe deposits had been the sole objects of his attention—a fact which had added considerably to the difficulties of the police.

Curiously enough, the extent of The Black's depredations was never known. His hobby was to rifle private boxes and safes where respectable men hid up the items that would seriously challenge their respectability if they were dragged to the light of day. Some men hid money that way, forgoing the interest that might accrue for the sake of having at hand a nest egg against a stormy day when their worst fears were realised. Naturally, these were vague about their losses, often denying that they had lost anything of value. The Black was obviously a student of human nature, and robbed well, and it was a fact that, in the course of five years, though twenty-three burglaries stood to his discredit, there was no definite charge of stealing a definite sum which might pass the scrutiny of a Grand Jury.

At five o'clock that afternoon, Mr. Marborne called at 307 Grosvenor Place, where Ralph Hamon had his London residence. Marborne was a type of policeman to be found in every city of the civilised world. Graft is not the canker of any particular police force: it is a disease which makes its appearance,

and will continue to appear, wherever lowly and unscrupulous men rise to positions of authority. Wherever easy money is available, there will be found men ready and willing to take the tempting prizes of dishonesty without any thought of their responsibilities or their treachery to the causes they represent.

Hamon was writing letters when the detective was shown into the drawing-room. He rose and greeted the visitor effusively.

"Come right in, Marborne. I'm glad to see you. You got my letter?"

"Yes, I had it this morning," said Marborne, depositing his hat on the floor and seating himself carefully. "Three thousand pounds you lost, eh? I suppose you've got the numbers of the notes?"

"Yes, I have the numbers, but that won't worry him. You know how easy it is to pass stolen money; and when you're dealing with an expert like The Black, I don't think it's worth while building any hope of catching him through the notes."

Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the servant with a large silver tray and the refreshment which was essential to Marborne's comfort.

"You're sure it was The Black?" asked the detective, when his host had carefully closed and locked the door behind the servant.

"Certain."

"Why didn't you report it to the local police?" asked Marborne curiously. "It would have been a simple matter to have got a search-warrant—you were staying with Lord Creith, and he's Chairman of the Quarter Sessions."

Hamon shook his head.

"That isn't the way. I had no evidence but my suspicion. You don't suppose for one minute that we should have found the stuff in Morlake's house, do you? No, that course was suggested by Lord Creith himself, but I didn't proceed with it, because"—he leant forward, and lowered his voice—"that would have spoilt the scheme I spoke to you about a month ago."

The detective pursed his lips dubiously.

"It's going to be a pretty hard job to frame up a charge, and it'll cost you a bit of money, Mr. Hamon. I have been thinking it out, and though I know the very men for the work, it will mean spending money freely."

"Spend to the limit," said Hamon violently, "but get him! He's in London—I suppose you know that?"

The detective nodded.

"Yes, I've 'tailed him up' as far as it's possible. I've got a friend of mine, Sergeant Slone, on the job, but it hasn't been easy. Our code doesn't allow a man to be 'tailed' unless an official report has been made against him to the police, and I've had to get Slone to work in his spare time."

"Any work done for me will be paid for," said Hamon a little impatiently. "Have you got the scheme worked out?"

The inspector nodded.

"There is a house on Blackheath," he said, "owned by a retired Colonial officer. He is a rich man, and has a wonderful collection of antique jewellery. There are only his wife, his daughter and three servants in the house, and I've got a man who could crack it in about five minutes. It wouldn't be so easy to get the jewellery, because that is kept in a safe, but there's no need to worry about touching the stuff. The thing is to get him to the house, and to leave enough evidence to catch your man. The real difficulty is going to be to break down any alibi that he may have. It is useless pulling him in for a burglary at Blackheath if he can prove that at the time he was in his club."

"Can you bring him to Blackheath by any means?" asked the interested Mr. Hamon.

The detective nodded.

"That is what I'm working for," he said, "but it will require a whole lot of manœuvring. Morlake lives in a sort of Oriental flat in Bond Street and has two servants—a Moor named Mahmet—he's travelling a lot in Morocco—and a valet named Binger, who is a pensioner of the 14th Hussars. Binger doesn't live on the premises: he lives with his wife and family in the Blackheath Road—that's why I chose Blackheath. Usually,

when Morlake's in town, Binger comes down to Blackheath by one of the all-night cars that run on the southern route. Sergeant Slone has become friendly with Binger, who doesn't know, of course, that Slone is a police officer. Every attempt he has made to get Binger to talk about his boss has been useless so far. I'm perfectly sure he knows a lot more about Morlake than he tells. But he's as dumb as an oyster the moment the conversation turns round to James Morlake."

"How is this going to help you?" asked Hamon.

"It's going to help me a lot," said the inspector deliberately. "Morlake is fond of this man, and when he was ill, about two years ago, he used to go down every day in his car to Blackheath Road and bring him fruit and books, and had his own doctor attending him. Sometimes Binger comes home early, and the next night this happens we'll work the frame-up. Can you get anything of Morlake's—a handkerchief, a pocket-book——?"

Hamon shook his head.

"No," he said shortly. "I have never been into his house."

"That is unfortunate, but it isn't absolutely necessary. I'll have his initials engraved on a pocket-knife—it's easier to prove that you own an article than it is to prove you never owned it! It'll cost a bit—as I say, it's going to be a costly business."

Mr. Hamon took his note-case out, and passed across the table a sum considerably in excess of Marborne's wildest anticipations.

With this money in his pocket, and a corresponding sense of elation in his soul, the detective strolled out to join the waiting Slone. He had reason for gratification, since the plan, if successful, would not only make him a comparatively rich man (supposing Hamon kept his promise), but would wipe out the memory of a number of very ugly incidents that had disfigured his official career, and would inevitably qualify him for promotion if "The Black" were convicted.

Slone was waiting for him on the corner of the street.

"Did he drop?" he asked, and Inspector Marborne frowned.

"I wish you'd get out of that vulgar way of talking, Slone,"

he said severely. "My friend gave me a little money for expenses, but I don't want you to think that he's the Bank of England. I've got a hundred for you on account, which I'll give you when we get to my flat. You told Colley to be there?"

"He's been waiting all the afternoon," said Slone. "Lieber hasn't turned up—but he's slow, being Dutch. What is the big idea?"

"You'll hear about it," said the other cryptically.

Colley proved to be an undersized, wizened man whose face had been not the least of his misfortunes. For, to the evidence which had been produced against him from time to time in various courts of law, there was added the unflattering testimony of a face in which "criminal" was written so unmistakably that the most sentimental of jury-women was ready to convict him before the evidence was through.

He was waiting on the pavement opposite the detective's lodgings, and followed the two men through the door. In Mr. Marborne's snug sitting-room he took the cigar that was offered him with an ingratiating smile.

"The sergeant said you wanted to see me, Mr. Marborne," he said. "I got a bit of a fright at first, because I thought you wanted me for that Mill Hill job. If I never move out of this room alive, I'm as innocent——"

"Shut up about the Mill Hill job. I know who did it," said Marborne. "I've got some work for you, Colley."

The face of the thief fell.

"I don't mean honest work," said the detective, "so don't get alarmed! Now listen to this, and listen very carefully. There's a friend of mine who wants to have a little joke with somebody. You needn't worry about the joke being on you, because it won't be."

He explained carefully in detail just what was required of Colley, and as he listened, the man, who at first was alarmed, began to see daylight.

"You want me to get in and get out again quick: is that it?"

"Not too quick," corrected Marborne. "I shall want you to make a bit of a fuss. Let 'em see you, you understand?"

Colley pulled a wry face.

"If this fellow's a Colonial, maybe he's got a gun, and if he sees me before I see him, there'll be some one-sided shooting. It's a fine joke, Mr. Marborne, but it don't amuse me as much as a good Chaplin film."

It took an hour of solid talking to persuade Colley that the danger was negligible and the reward so munificent that he need not work again for a year. In the end he was persuaded, and it was arranged that he should be within call for the next week. When the interview was over, Mr. Marborne went forth to what he knew would be the most difficult of his tasks, and with him went a Mr. Lieber, a belated arrival on the scene.

"I may not want you, Lieber, but you can wait around in case I do. You know Morlake?"

Mr. Lieber, who was stout, shook his head, for he needed all his breath to keep pace with the long-striding detective.

"You can't mistake him, and anyway, I'll be with you to point him out."

"Is he a crook?" wheezed Lieber.

"He's a crook, and I want an identification—the same as you got for me in the Crewe case. A handkerchief, a pocket-book, papers—anything. But I may not need you. Here we are —wait on the corner and follow me when I come out."

Binger opened the door to the caller and eyed him suspiciously, for, although Marborne was unknown to the valet, there was a something "official" in his manner which the old soldier instantly recognised.

"I don't know whether Mr. Morlake is hin or whether he's hout," he said. "If you wait a bit I'll see."

He closed the door in his visitor's face and went into the big Oriental room where James Morlake was reading.

"He says his name is Kelly, sir, and maybe it his and maybe it hain't."

"What did he say his business was?" asked Morlake, closing his book.

"He said he'd met you in Morocco some years ago, and had only just found your address."

"Show him in, will you?" said James Morlake, after a mo-

ment's thought, and Mr. Marborne, strolling into the big room, took in its beauty with an admiring glance.

"Sit down, Mr. Kelly. I have no chairs, because I have no visitors—perhaps you will sit on the divan."

Marborne seated himself with a little smirk.

"It is a long time since I met you, Mr. Morlake. I suppose you don't remember me dining at your table at the Cecil, in Tangier, some ten years ago?"

"I have a dim recollection," said Morlake, eyeing his visitor carelessly.

"I was travelling for a hardware firm," said Marborne glibly, and all the time he was speaking he was casting his eyes around, trying to find some little article by which his man might be identified on some future and vital occasion. "I don't know whether you trouble to keep chance acquaintances in your mind, but I have a very pleasant recollection of our meeting."

"I remember you now," said Jim Morlake; "though you have altered a little since I saw you last."

Mr. Marborne looked up at the carved ceiling.

"Beautiful bit of work there; they couldn't do it in this country, or any other," he said. "You've got a lovely place. Nobody would imagine, walking on Bond Street, that there was a real Moorish room within half-a-dozen paces."

He had found what he needed: it lay in the shadow at the back of the stationery rack—a small leather folder on which he could see, even at that distance, three initials. It was too small for a pocket-book, and he guessed it to be a little stamp case until, nearer at hand, he saw that it held a clip of flat matches.

Rising from the divan, he strolled across the room until he stood opposite the watchful man, his hands resting on the desk. Presently:

"I have no business whatever to interrupt a busy person like you," he said, "but I thought, as I was in London for a day, I'd give you a call. It was not inconvenient, I hope?"

His fingers had touched the match case and closed over it. To slip the little leather folder into his pocket was unnecessary: it was so small that he could palm it.

"I'm always glad to see my old Moroccan friends," said Jim. "Won't you have a drink, Mr. Kelly?"

"No, thank you," said Kelly. "I won't occupy any more of your time. I was told that you didn't live in town—that you had a house somewhere in Sussex."

"Yes, I have a house in Sussex," said Jim quietly.

By this time the match case was in the detective's pocket.

"If you're ever in Liverpool, look me up—John L. Kelly," said Marborne, as he put out his hand. "You'll find me in the telephone directory—943 Lime Street. I'm very glad indeed to have met you again, Mr. Morlake."

Jim took the hand and watched his visitor as he strolled towards the curtained hallway.

"Oh, by the way," he said, as the man reached the curtain, "you might be good enough to leave my matches behind—I may want them.

Marborne stared and started.

"Your—your matches?" he stammered.

"Yes, they're in your right-hand trousers pocket, Inspector," said Jim, hardly looking up from the book he had opened.

"I have no matches," said Marborne loudly.

"Then you have used them, and I will take the case," said Jim. "And, Inspector, if you give me any trouble, I shall call up headquarters and tell your chief something about the gentleman who runs a receiver's business in Marylebone Lane. You get a rake-off of ten per cent., I am told—I am sure the excellent Commissioner does not know that."

Marborne's face twitched and he changed colour. He opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it, then, taking the case from his pocket, he flung it on the ground.

"Thank you," said Jim gently.

The man's face was dark with rage, as, stung by the cool contempt of the other, he turned.

"I'll get you one of these days, Morlake," he quavered in his fury. "You'll not get away with it *all* the time!"

"And you won't get away with my matches *any* time," said Jim, and, to Binger, who had appeared in the opening between

the curtains: "Show this gentleman out, and see that he doesn't take my umbrella from the hall-stand."

CHAPTER XI

Jane Smith

WHEN the door had closed upon the infuriated policeman, Binger hastened back to his employer.

"That man was a detective," he whispered hoarsely.

"I know that," said Jim, stifling a yawn. "He stole my matches—what other proof was needed, Binger?"

"What did he come here for, sir?" asked Binger in agitation.

"To find out all about me, and apparently to get a light for his cigar. He knows all he'll ever know. Don't worry your head about him, Binger."

"Them fellows are as hartful as monkeys," said the valet.

"Hartfuller," agreed Jim, "but not much. A monkey isn't clever at all: get that into your nut, Binger. He's the most stupid of all the lower animals."

"Are you going out to-night, sir?" after a pause.

"No, I'm staying in to-night. You may go home early to your wife and family—I suppose you have a family?"

"Yes, sir, I've two boys in the Harmy," said Binger proudly.

Jim Morlake nodded.

"I don't think I shall want you for anything more. Tell Mahmet to bring me coffee: I shall be working late to-night."

When the man had gone, he laid down his book and began slowly to pace the big room, his hands clasped behind him, a far-away look in his eyes and a frown upon his handsome face. He heard the thud of the door as Binger went home, and a few seconds later the little Moorish servant came in, bearing a tray with the paraphernalia for coffee-making.

Jim watched him idly, and when the man's task was finished and he had salaamed his way out of the room, he walked to the divan, and stooping, lifted the top that came up like the lid of

a box. In the cavity beneath was a small steel safe lying on its back. He fitted a key in the lock and, pulling up the door, took out a large bundle of banknotes. For half an hour he was sorting them into their various denominations. When he had finished, he counted the bundles carefully, enclosed them in various envelopes, on each of which he wrote a different name and address, which he took from a pocket diary which he carried in his waistcoat pocket. This done, he replaced all the envelopes in the safe, closed and locked it and replaced the "lid" of the divan.

He looked at his watch: it was half-past eleven. He did not feel tired; the book he had been reading was very dull, yet no outside amusement attracted him.

He sat down again to consider the problem of Marborne's visit. Marborne, in his simplicity, had imagined that he was unknown, but in truth there was not a detective holding any rank in the headquarters police whose face James Morlake did not know.

Why had he come? Why had he been guilty of so paltry a theft? Jim had not seen the matches go, but he had known they were on the desk and when the detective had walked to the table he had observed the palming. What was the object, he wondered—he could supply half-a-dozen solutions, none of which was wholly convincing to himself.

He got up and passed through a narrow arched doorway into a smaller room, furnished with a bed and a wardrobe. He would go out, he decided, and changed his shoes. He was opening the door of the flat when he saw a letter on the floor. It had evidently been pushed through the slot, and, picking it up, he saw that it had been delivered by hand. It was addressed in pencilled writing to "Mr. Morelake," and it was marked "Urgent."

Tearing open the envelope, he read the few scrawled lines it contained, and reading, he frowned. Presently he folded the letter, put it back in its envelope and slipped it into his pocket.

"Mahmet, did you hear anybody outside?" he asked when the servant had come in response to his signal.

"No, effendi—not since the secretary went. I was in the hall then."

Morlake took the letter from his pocket.

"This was not here when you let Binger out?"

"No—there was nothing."

The letter must have been delivered while he was changing his shoes.

Restoring the scrawled warning to his pocket, he went out on the stone landing. His flat was the only residential apartment in the building, the lower floors being offices, the ground floor a *couturière's* establishment. Usually at this hour of the night the caretaker, the only other person in the building at night, was to be found smoking in the small entrance hall, but to-night he was absent.

As Morlake came into the street, Inspector Marborne, standing in the shadow of a door, tapped his companion on the shoulder.

"There's your man, Lieber," he said.

The pickpocket nodded and walked across the road, following the tall man, who was moving at a leisurely pace toward Piccadilly. As he reached the corner, Morlake stopped and looked left and right irresolutely as though he were undecided which way he should go. At that moment a stout little man, walking rapidly, came into violent collision with him.

"Steady, my friend," said James Morlake, recovering from the shock.

"Excuse me," mumbled the little man, and went on his way at the same furious rate, Jim Morlake looking after him with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

Inspector Marborne was waiting for the thief at the corner of Air Street, and as the little man turned into that deserted thoroughfare, Marbone fell in at his side.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I got something," said Lieber, putting his hand in his pocket. "There's no handkerchief or case in his pocket, but I got a letter."

Impatiently the inspector tore it from his hand and, halting beneath a street standard, examined the prize.

"It is addressed to him all right," he said. "Now, Mr. Morlake, I think I've got you."

He pulled out the letter and read it. Lieber watching him, saw his mouth open in horrified amazement.

Dear Mr. Morlake [the message ran], *Ralph Hamon employs a police officer named Marborne, who is laying a trap for you.*

It was signed "Jane Smith."

"Who the devil is Jane Smith?" gasped Marborne.

This was the identical question that James Morlake was asking himself at that moment.

CHAPTER XII

Miss Lydia Hamon

THE detective turned from his examination of the letter to glower at his companion.

"You're a fine thief, Lieber!" he snarled. "Is this all you could get?"

Lieber's puffy face fell.

"Ain't it enough, Mr. Marborne?" he asked, aggrieved. "You said 'Get a letter,' and I got it."

"You got it all right," said the other grimly. "Oh, yes, you got it!"

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and left his gaping agent staring after him.

Little things amuse, but they also distress little minds. The discovery that his association with Hamon was known to "Jane Smith" worried him horribly—it worried him more because he was so deeply committed to the plot that it was impossible to go back. The scheme must be carried through, but first he must make sure of his ground. He hailed a taxi and drove to Grosvenor Place. The servant who admitted him, and who knew him, said that Mr. Hamon was out.

"Will you see Miss Hamon?" asked the man.

"Miss Hamon?—I didn't know there was a Miss Hamon," said Marborne in surprise.

The butler might have explained that the visits of Miss Hamon to London were few and far between, and he could have supplemented the information that, rare as they were, the household of 307 Grosvenor Place would have been delighted if they were even rarer. For Lydia Hamon was that type of young woman (and the type was not exclusively confined to the young) who, having risen to affluence from the borderland of poverty, lived in a state of perpetual fear that their superiority to the rest of the world was not being duly recognised.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Hamon has a sister—she lives in Paris."

Lydia certainly lived in Paris. She had a small apartment on the Bois and a very highly-polished coupé that was driven by a Japanese chauffeur in a rose-red livery. She studied art in a genteel way, knew many old Royalist families and spoke French to her own satisfaction.

Leaving Marborne in the hall, the servant went into the drawing-room, closing the door behind him. It was a little time before he reappeared to beckon the visitor forward.

Lydia Hamon was pretty and thin. Her hair, a dull red, was bobbed in the French manner and bound by a filet of bronze-coloured ribbon. Her arms, otherwise bare, were encircled by bracelets that flashed and glittered in the light of shaded wall brackets. She turned her dark eyes languidly in the direction of the detective as he entered, and the thin eyebrows arched inquiringly. Otherwise, she made no attempt to greet the visitor, nor did she rise from the couch on which she was lying.

Marborne, a susceptible man, was struck dumb by what he regarded as her unearthly beauty. The green evening gown, the dull gold of dainty shoes and silken stockings, the delicate hands that shaded her eyes as though his coming had introduced a new brilliancy into the room, were all parts of the charm which momentarily overwhelmed him.

"You want to see my brother?" she drawled (she actually said "brothah," and the gentility of the intonation took his breath away).

"Yes, miss, I have a little business with him."

She looked at the diamond-studded watch on her wrist.

"He will be back very soon," she said. "I know nothing about business, so I'm afraid I can't help you. Won't you sit down, Mr. Marlow?"

"Marborne," murmured the detective, seating himself gingerly on the edge of a chair. "I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you before, Miss Hamon."

She inclined her head, signifying her regret that this pleasure had not been his.

"I live mostly abroad, in my dear Paris," she said. "Life there is so different, so real! London, with its commercialism and absence of soul, frightens me."

Inspector Marborne, who was not a classy talker, felt it was a moment to suggest that the efficiency of the London police force was such that nobody need be frightened, but happily, before she could lead him again out of his depth, Hamon came in.

"Hullo, Marborne!" he said anxiously. "What is wrong?" He glanced at the reclining figure on the sofa. "You've met my sister? Lydia, this is Mr. Marborne, a friend of mine and an officer of the Metropolitan Police."

"Really?" She raised her eyebrows again, but, to Marborne's disappointment, did not seem particularly impressed.

"We'll go up to my den," said Hamon, and he hustled the detective from the room before the impressionable Marborne could begin taking leave.

Behind the closed doors of Hamon's room, the inspector told his story.

"Let me see the letter," said Hamon.

He studied it under the light of the table lamp, his lips pursed, his eyebrows gathered in a frown.

"Jane Smith? Who the dickens is Jane Smith?" he muttered.

"Is there anybody who knows about—about this matter?" asked Marborne.

"Nobody. I mentioned it to my sister, but to no other soul."

At first astonished, Marborne was a little perturbed.

"I wish you hadn't mentioned it to anybody, Mr. Hamon," he said.

"I haven't," said the other impatiently. "I did no more than tell Lydia that I'd got a scheme for settling with Morlake. One thing I'll swear—that the writing isn't Lydia's, and anyway, she doesn't know the man, and would not write to him if she did. Is this all you've got?"

"It is all that is necessary," said Marborne airily. "I've got the scheme so well fixed that it isn't necessary we should have anything of Morlake's. The envelope will be found—any clue that leads us to Morlake is sufficient."

He did not tell of the visit he had paid, feeling that it was hardly the moment to confess a fresh failure.

"When are you going to do the job?" asked Hamon.

Marborne shrugged.

"It depends entirely upon circumstances. I hope to fix it this week," he said. "You need have no fear. I can get enough evidence to convict him, and once he's pinched, it will be easy to search his flat and his house in Sussex. Why didn't you have him arrested in the country? It would have been an easy matter to have got a search-warrant——"

"Don't ask dam' fool questions," said the other impatiently. "Let me know when you're taking him, and I'll be on hand to furnish the etceteras."

When the detective had gone, Hamon went down to his sister.

"Who is that man?" she asked, yawning undisguisedly. "You always seem to have such queer people at your house, Ralph."

"Why did you come over?" he asked.

"Because I'm short of money. I've bought the loveliest little statuette—a genuine Demetri; and I've been losing a terrible lot at cards. One must keep one's end up, Ralph."

He looked at her without speaking.

"Besides, I've promised to spend a week-end with dear Lady Darlew. She has an awfully nice boy at Eton——"

"Now listen to me, Lydia," interrupted Hamon. "When I started making money, you were serving in a West End bar,

earning enough to keep body and soul together, and I'd like you to remember that fact. I'm not made of money, and I'm not going to increase your allowance. You forget these friends of yours who have sons at Eton, and remember that you were serving bad drinks at Lembo's Dive." He saw the fury in her eyes, but went on.

"The time is rapidly approaching when you are going to earn your keep, my girl."

"What do you mean?" she asked. She was no longer the languid child of fashion, but stood before him, her hands on her hips, her voice harsh with anger. "Do you expect me to go back serving drinks whilst you're making tens of thousands? I've helped you, Ralph, and don't forget it! You haven't forgotten Johnny Cornford, I hope, and what I did for you there?"

His face went a shade paler.

"You needn't talk about Johnny Cornford or anybody else," he said roughly; "and don't go up in the air, because I'm talking to you for your good. I shall want your help, I tell you. Marborne's got a big idea of catching Morlake, and if we can't catch him one way he's got to be caught another, and you've got to do it."

"Oh, I have, have I?" she sneered. "And what do I get for it? The same as I got out of the Cornford business—nothing!"

"I got nothing, either," he said quickly.

"That is a lie! Oh, you needn't scowl at me, Ralph: I'm not afraid of you! I heard that tale about Cornford before. Nothing!"

"I got nothing, I tell you," he said loudly. "It was the biggest disappointment I ever had. If the luck hadn't run for me, I'd have been down and out. I never had a penny of Cornford's money."

There was a brief but ominous silence, and then she asked:

"What am I to do with this Morlake? Is he to be jollied along? Has he any money?"

"Stacks of it," said the other tersely, "but it isn't his money I want."

She raised her thin eyebrows.

"You must be pretty well off not to worry about his money," she said, and asked again: "What am I to do?"

"It depends entirely on how well Marborne's plan goes," said her brother. "We needn't discuss it till then."

"What is he like?" she asked. "This Morlake?"

He went out of the room and came back with a photograph, which he handed to her, and she looked at the picture with a calculating eye.

"He's rather nice-looking," she said. "Who is he?"

"I'd give a lot of money to know," snapped Hamon. "Don't ask questions, Lydia. All I want to know from you is: is he the type of man that you could make up to if it paid you good money?"

She looked from the picture to her brother.

"That type, and any type," she said briefly.

CHAPTER XIII

At Blackheath

IT WAS on a Friday night, and a thin film of fog lay over the City, the forerunner of those dense mists which in a month's time would make the town uninhabitable.

Jim Morlake had finished the light dinner which the Moor had served, and was reading the evening newspaper with the air of one who hoped to find something amusing in its pages, but had very little expectation of his hopes being realised. Binger had gone home earlier than usual, with instructions not to return for three days, for that night Morlake intended returning to Wold House, and his suitcase awaited him in the hall. He could have gone earlier, but the fog had been unusually thick that afternoon, and he was waiting for it to disperse. The car was at the door, and, putting down the newspaper, he walked to the window, pulled aside the heavy curtains and looked out.

"I think I will go now, Mahmet," he said, and at that moment the telephone bell rang sharply.

He took up the instrument, and a strange and excited voice called him by name.

"Is that Mr. Morlake? . . . I am speaking from Blackheath. Binger has been knocked down by a motor-bus and has been taken to 12 Cranfield Gardens. Can you come at once?"

"Is he badly hurt?" asked Morlake quickly.

"He is not expected to live," was the answer. "I am Dr. Grainger."

Jim only waited long enough to discover the exact location of Cranfield Gardens, and a few minutes later he was driving at full speed in the direction of Blackheath. The fog in the south of London was thicker than he had anticipated, and progress was slow, but it cleared at New Cross and presently disappeared altogether, and he looked up into an unclouded sky, in which the stars were twinkling frostily.

Lieber, watching the flat, saw the car depart, and, hastening to a public telephone booth, gave a number. It was Marborne who answered him.

"He's gone," said Lieber breathlessly. "Went away at five minutes past ten."

"Is he alone?"

"Yes, driving his own car. And he looked to be in a hurry."

Marborne hung up the telephone receiver, paid the proprietor of the little Greenwich restaurant, in which he had been waiting for an hour for the news, and hurried out to where Slone and Colley were waiting for him.

"There is no time to be lost, Colley. Get into that house just as quickly as you can."

"It's early yet, Mr. Marborne. They won't be in bed," protested Colley.

"The whole house goes to bed at nine," said the other impatiently. "Do you think I haven't made sure of that?"

The car that had been hired for the night carried them to Blackheath, and at the corner of Cranfield Gardens Colley received his instructions.

"You'll get through the pantry window and up to the first

floor. If you like to smash one of the glass cases where the jewellery is kept, you can. Now there will be no risk, Colley. As soon as you've done your work and got the family aroused, get out. You haven't any time to spare."

The burglar slunk away into the darkness, and the uncomfortable Slone interrogated his superior.

"It's crude, inspector. He'll never fall into a trap as open as that," he said. "He'll go straight to his servant's house and he'll find him at home."

"I tell you he will come straight here. I could tell by his voice, when I called him up, that he is worried about Binger."

The two men walked rapidly down Cranfield Gardens and turned into a gateway.

"I can hear the sound of a car coming up the hill," said Marborne suddenly. "Get into the shadow of the steps."

"I don't like it," growled Slone. "It's too easy, I tell you. It can't go right——"

"Shut up!" hissed the other. "Here is the car."

Turning from Blackheath Hill, Jim Morlake stopped the machine and alighted. No. 12 was the fourth house from that end of the street he had entered, a high-fronted, sombre house, showing no sign of light. He had unlatched and passed through the wooden gate before the absence of the red light which usually advertises a doctor's house occurred to him, and he walked back to inspect the gate posts to make sure. Yes, it was No. 12. Hesitating no longer, he walked up the path and mounted the stone steps. As he did so, he heard, from inside the house, a shot and the thump of heavy feet in the hall, and drew back.

And then there came to him instinctively an understanding of his danger, and he flew down the steps. Two strides he took in the direction of the gate, and something struck him. He half turned, dazed and semi-conscious, and again the blow fell and everything went dark.

When he recovered consciousness, he was lying on a hard wooden form, and a man was doing something to his head. He opened his eyes, and in the dim light of the cell in which he lay he saw a bearded figure fixing a bandage.

"Lie down," said the doctor authoritatively, and Jim obeyed.

It *was* a cell: he had recognised the character of the apartment the moment he had opened his eyes. How had he got there, and what had happened? Then he remembered the blow that had struck him down. His head was throbbing painfully; he had an uncomfortable feeling of restriction about his hands, and, looking at them, he saw that they were clipped together with handcuffs.

"Why am I here?" he asked.

"I daresay the inspector will tell you all about it," said the doctor as he pinned the ends of the bandage and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

"Oh, he will, will he?" said Jim dully. "Well, I should very much like him to come and give his explanation. How is Binger?" He smiled faintly. "I suppose the Binger story was a fake? The inspector to whom you refer is Inspector Marborne?"

"You'd better ask him," said the diplomatic doctor. "He will be here in a few minutes."

He went out, and the cell door clanged on James Morlake. With some difficulty he raised himself to a sitting position and took stock of his unhappy state. Mechanically he put his hand in his pocket: it was empty. He tried another with a similar result. His watch and chain had gone, his cigarette-case, everything he had possessed had been taken from him.

He was very much alert now; he even forgot the physical pain he suffered.

There was a click of a lock, the cell door opened, and Marborne came in with a smile of triumph on his face.

"Well, Morlake, we've got you at last!"

"I ought to have given you those matches," said Jim coolly; "and really, if I'd known that you had taken such a fancy to them, Marborne, that you would waylay and rob me, I'd have saved you the trouble."

"I don't know what you mean about matches," said Marborne brusquely. "All I know is that we've caught you with the goods. You know my name?"

"I know your name," nodded Jim. "You're Inspector Marborne."

"I am Inspector Marborne," said the man in his best official manner, "and I shall charge you with burglariously entering No. 12 Cranfield Gardens last night. I shall further charge you with being in possession of a loaded revolver and housebreaking implements. I shall further charge you with breaking and entering the Burlington Safe Deposit on the seventeenth of this month, and still further with breaking and entering the Home Counties Bank on the twelfth of August."

He paused.

"Don't let me interrupt your curious recital," said Jim. "You will also caution me that anything I say may be used in evidence against me. That is your duty, you know, inspector, but you omitted the customary caution."

The detective was scrutinising him keenly.

"You'll be interested to know that I've also arrested your accomplice, Jane Smith," he said, and Jim chuckled.

"I'm delighted! I should very much like to see Jane Smith. And have you arrested our friend Hamon too?"

The detective smiled indulgently.

"None of that, Morlake," he said. "You know I've not arrested Mr. Hamon. What charge could you make against him?"

Jim was silent for a moment, and then:

"Wilful murder," he said quietly; "and I should charge you with being an accomplice after the fact."

CHAPTER XIV

Caught!

For a time the police officer did not recognise the significance of Jim's charge.

"What do you mean?" he asked roughly. "Wilful murder!"

"As to how much you know of the matter I have yet to learn, Marborne," said Jim Morlake quietly. "But on the day I catch Hamon it will go pretty hard with *you!*"

"When you catch Hamon—are you pretending to be a policeman too?" asked the other sarcastically.

"I'm not even pretending to be a policeman. I have never sunk so low," said Jim.

The detective stooped down and pulled him to his feet.

"You're coming out to see a few of the jiggers that were found on you when you were arrested," he said, and pushed him along the corridor to the charge room.

On the station sergeant's desk was a variety of articles. There was a black silk mask, the eyeholes of which, as Jim saw with a professional glance, had been newly cut; an automatic pistol, a complete set of house-breaking tools, a small acetylene blow-lamp, a tiny rubber case containing six phials, and three small skeleton keys.

"Are these supposed to be mine? Where did I carry them —in my waistcoat pocket?" he asked.

"Some were in your coat pocket, some were concealed under the cushion of your car," said the detective. "You admit these are yours, I suppose?"

"I admit nothing. The only thing I can't see, which really belongs to me, is a gold watch and chain, which I presume you have confiscated for personal use. There was also a little money —some sixty-five pounds—which isn't visible. Are those also your personal perquisites, Marborne?'

"I've got the money and the watch in my desk," said the station sergeant. "You don't make your case any better by bringing charges against this officer, Morlake."

"Perhaps I don't," admitted Jim after a moment's thought. He held up his manacled hands.

"These are not exactly necessary, are they, sergeant?"

"I don't think so."

The sergeant took down a key from behind his desk, and unlocking the handcuffs, removed them. In charge of the gaoler, Jim was removed to the cell.

Joan Carston was at breakfast at Lowndes Square, reading the morning newspaper, when Hamon was announced, and with a groan she put down the journal and glanced pathetically across to her father.

"Bless the man! Why does he come at this hour of the morning?" he demanded irritably. "I thought we should be free of him for a month or so?"

He was not in a pleasant frame of mind. The horse he had backed for the long distance handicap at Newmarket had been struck out overnight, and he was not unnaturally annoyed.

"We shall have to see him: let us get it over," said Joan, resigned.

Ralph Hamon's manner was both brisk and cheerful: in fact, the girl had never seen him quite so bright as he was, as he pranced into the dining-room—the description was hers.

"I have some very interesting news for you people this morning," he said, almost jovially, as, without invitation, he pulled out a chair and sat down to the breakfast table. "We've got the devil!"

"Good business," murmured his lordship. "I hope you will fasten the customary chains to his legs and cast him down into his jolly old pit."

"Which particular devil are you talking about, Mr. Hamon?" asked the girl, with a sinking of her heart.

"Morlake. He was caught red-handed last night, burglaring a house at Blackheath."

She jumped to her feet.

"You don't mean that!" she gasped. "Mr. Morlake . . . oh, no, it isn't true!"

"It is delightfully true," said Hamon. (She thought he smacked his lips.) "He was caught red-handed in the act of breaking into the house of a man who has a collection of antique jewellery. Fortunately, two police officers who have had him under observation for some time had shadowed him, and took him just as he was running out of the house, having been disturbed in his work by the owner, a Colonel Paterson."

Lord Creith took off his glasses and stared at the other in amazement.

"You mean James Morlake, our neighbour?" he asked incredulously.

Hamon nodded.

"I mean The Black, the cleverest burglar we've had in this country for years."

Joan had sunk back to her seat: the room seemed to be swimming. Hamon was telling the truth; there was no mistaking the exhilaration in his voice.

"Of course you caught him," she said at last, speaking slowly as though to herself. "You said you would, didn't you?"

"I didn't exactly catch him myself," said Hamon, loth to relinquish the credit, "but I must confess that I was able to give the police a great deal of useful information. And by the way, Lady Joan, my sister is giving herself the pleasure of calling on you to-day."

"Yes?" said Joan absently. "Oh, yes, you have a sister in Paris. I'm afraid I shan't be at home this afternoon."

"I thought you wouldn't be, so I told her to call this morning. You'll like Lydia: she's a good girl, though I'm afraid I've spoilt her a little. But she's one of the best."

"When will Mr. Morlake come for trial?" she asked, dismissing the existence of Lydia Hamon.

"He'll come up this morning for the preliminary hearing, and then I suppose he'll be remanded, and next week he'll be committed for trial. You're interested in him, aren't you? Well, it is only natural that you should be. These rascals have a certain romantic interest, even for the more law-abiding."

"Not every rascal," she answered instantly. "I know some who are the most uninteresting creatures it is possible to meet!"

She had recovered her poise, and Lord Creith, who knew his daughter remarkably well, detected what Mr. Hamon had failed to notice—a certain gentle malignity in her voice, and writhed at the memory of past encounters with his daughter that had left him a little limp.

"Has he any friends? I mean, is there anybody who would bail him?"

"No bail would be allowed," answered Hamon promptly.

"Having got the fellow, it is hardly likely that the police are going to risk his bolting, especially as he put up a tough fight before he was captured."

"Was he hurt?" she asked quickly.

"He got a blow or two," said Hamon, with a careless shrug, and her eyes did not leave his.

"You know a great deal about this: I suppose they 'phoned you up and told you, as you were interested?"

"I only know what I read in the newspapers," said Hamon quickly, and he saw her lip curl.

"It is not in the newspapers," she said. "It happened too late last night to be in the morning Press."

She got up from the table and walked out of the room without another word.

"Joan takes a tremendous interest in this fellow," growled Hamon.

"Why shouldn't she?" demanded Lord Creith, beaming at him. "I think he's immensely interesting. By Jove, I wish I'd known he was a burglar! I'd have gone to him and found an easier way of making money than selling my poor old Creith, lock, stock and barrel. Where will this interesting criminal come up for trial?"

"At Greenwich Police Court," said the other.

"Greenwich!" said Lord Creith, as though Greenwich Police Court were the last place in the world he would have imagined the man would be brought for judgment.

It was near mid-day when a gaoler called his name, and Jim Morlake walked through an open door into the large court and was guided to the steel pen. The court was crowded, and the reporters' bench, designed to hold three uncomfortably, held half-a-dozen young men in agony, whilst an army of Pressmen overflowed into the public benches.

Brief evidence of the arrest was given; a hint was offered that new and more startling charges would be produced at the next hearing, and the police, represented by their official lawyer, asked for a remand—a course which Jim's attorney mechanically opposed, though his opposition was overruled.

"On the question of bail, your worship——" began the defending counsel, but the magistrate shook his head.

"There can be no question of bail," he said.

And here there occurred an unexpected interruption. A tall, lean man stepped, without invitation, to the witness-box and handed his card to the magistrates' clerk.

"This gentleman"—he looked over his glasses at the wondering Jim—"is a neighbour of mine, and I am particularly anxious that he shall have every facility for preparing his defence."

"I am extremely sorry, Lord Creith," said the magistrate, "but in these cases, where the police oppose bail, as I understand they do, we cannot deviate from the rule of the court."

Jim went back to his cell wondering what on earth had induced this distinguished-looking old man, whom he knew by name, and whose home he had once burgled, to come forward and, in order to serve a man he did not know, court the publicity which many of his class so intensely disliked.

CHAPTER XV

Joan Makes a Confession

JOAN read, with as great astonishment, the account of her father's interposition in an evening newspaper, and when he came in to dinner that night she was waiting for him in the hall.

"Really, Daddy, you're a most wonderful person," she said, kissing him. "Did you see him?"

"I saw him," admitted Lord Creith, in whom any demonstration of affection on the part of his daughter produced a sense of discomfort, "and quite a nice-looking fellow he is, Joan." He shook his head. "The police say he's a most dangerous rascal. You'd never dream it to see him. To tell you the

truth"—he looked round and lowered his voice—"our friend Hamon is infinitely more criminal-looking! And for heaven's sake, don't repeat my words, Joan. The last time I said something unpleasant about Hamon, you blurted it out in the middle of dinner, and I had to lie myself blue to save my face."

Joan had successfully avoided meeting Miss Lydia Hamon that morning, and was hopeful that so inexcusably rude had she been in her failure to keep an appointment, that the girl would not call upon her. At any other time she would have been curious to see what type of individual a sister of Ralph Hamon would be. To-day one thought and one subject absorbed her.

The two hours before dinner Lord Creith ordinarily devoted to what he described as a siesta, and Joan usually occupied that period in dealing with her correspondence. She was in no heart to write to-day, and less in a mood to entertain visitors, so that Peters's announcement that Lydia Hamon had called wrung from her a sigh of despair.

"Ask her to come up," she said, and braced herself to be polite.

Her first feeling, on seeing the visitor, was one of surprise. Lydia had many accomplishments, not least of which was an exquisite taste in dress, and so fragile and sweet she looked, as she came into the drawing-room, that Joan found it difficult to believe that the girl could claim any relationship with the unprepossessing Mr. Hamon.

"I'm so sorry I have interrupted you," drawled the visitor, with a glance at the writing-table, which Joan had hastily littered with notepaper in preparation for an excuse to cut the interview short. "I called this morning; Ralph said you would be expecting me, but you were out."

Joan murmured her apologies, wondering what was the urgency of the business which brought the girl at this unconventional hour to make her call.

"I am only in London for a few days, and I simply had to see you," said Lydia, as though supplying an answer to the question uppermost in Joan's mind at that moment. "I live in Paris. Do you know Paris very well?"

"I know it a little. It is not my favourite city," said Joan.

"Really!" Those arched eyebrows of Lydia's rose. "I can't understand anybody not loving Paris: it is so delightful to people of taste."

"Then my taste is deficient," said Joan almost good-humouredly.

"No, I didn't mean that." The girl hastened to correct any possibly bad impression. "I think one *lives* there. Do you know the Duc de Montvidier? He is a great friend of ours."

She rattled off the names of a dozen noble Frenchmen without Joan discovering one in whom she might claim to have an interest, let alone an acquaintance.

"Ralph tells me he has bought your place in Sussex," said Lydia, playing with the handle of her parasol and looking past the girl. "It is a beautiful place, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is lovely," said Joan quietly.

"I think it is such a pity," cooed Lydia, "the old place passing out of your possession, which has been in your family for hundreds of years—it must be a great blow to you. I told Ralph that I wondered he had the heart to take possession."

"He hasn't taken possession yet; he doesn't so long as my father is alive," said Joan, beginning to understand the reason for the visit.

"Oh, yes, I know. I wasn't thinking about your father, I was thinking about you more particularly. And I know Ralph thinks about you a great deal."

Lydia looked under her eyelashes at the expressionless face of her hostess.

"Ralph worries very much. He is awfully kind-hearted. Very few people understand him. To the average every-day person, Ralph is just a money-grabbing Englishman with no soul above commerce. In reality, he is tender and kind and the most loyal of friends."

"He ought to make some girl a good husband," said Joan, leaping instantly into the breach.

The reply took Lydia aback. It was so abrupt a declaration of all that she meant to hint, that she lost her place in the narrative she had so well rehearsed.

"That is what I think. Honestly—though perhaps you will think it an impertinence of me to say so—Ralph is a prize worth winning."

"I don't know why you should think it an impertinence," said Joan, "since I am not a competitor for the prize."

A spirit of mischief was in her—the devil which on occasions caused Lord Creith great uneasiness of mind.

"You see, I couldn't very well marry your brother—to put the matter very plainly."

"Why not?" Lydia was betrayed into asking.

"Because I'm already engaged," said Joan. "In fact, the engagement is such a long-standing one that I shouldn't like to break it off."

"Engaged!"

It was evidently news to Lydia, and inwardly she grew angry with her brother that he had not added this information to the important details with which he had furnished her.

"Yes, I'm engaged."

"But you wear no engagement ring?" said Lydia.

"An engagement ring is not necessary when two hearts are in unison," replied Joan smugly.

"My brother doesn't know."

"Then you have some news to tell him," said Joan.

Lydia had risen and was twirling her parasol awkwardly, being at a loss now as to how the interview could be terminated with the least possible delay.

"I'm sure I hope you will be happy," she said tartly, "but I think it is the greatest mistake in the world for a girl of your breeding to marry somebody without money. And of course, if he had any money, he wouldn't have allowed Ralph to have bought your father's estate."

"Such marriages sometimes turn out badly," said Joan sweetly, "but one hopes this particular match—which is a love match into which the sordid question of money has never intruded—will be an exception."

The object of the girl's vsit was now explained. Her chagrin, her confusion, the undisguised annoyance in her face and mien told Joan all that she wanted to know.

"Perhaps you will change your mind," said Lydia, holding out a limp hand. "Ralph is the sort of man who is not easily put off anything he wants. He is a very good friend and a very bad enemy. There is a man who is kicking his heels in a prison cell who knows that!"

She saw the flush dawn in Joan's face, but misunderstood the cause.

"I don't know why people in prison should amuse themselves by kicking their heels," said Joan coldly; "and in all probability Mr. Morlake is quite cheerful."

"You know James Morlake?"

Joan met the dark eyes of Lydia Hamon and held them. "I ought to," she said slowly. "I am engaged to him."

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. Hamon Is Shown Out

THE Earl of Creith came down to dinner in the care-free mood which an afternoon nap, for some mysterious reason, invariably induced, and over the coffee Joan described her interview.

"Good heavens!" said his lordship, for the moment aghast. "What a thing to say!"

"I had to shock her," said Joan in justification.

"Shock her! But, merciful Moses! there were other ways of doing it, Joan. You could have told her that the wine at Creith was corked—as it undoubtedly is—or that the roof leaked—which it does. Why tell her that you're engaged to be married to a—a sort of burglar? You're not, are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm not. I don't even know him."

"H'm!" said her father, puckering his forehead. "Suppose this gets into the papers? 'Peeress Engaged to Burglar,' or 'Earl's Daughter to Wed Notorious American Cracksman on

His Release from Prison,' eh? How do you think *he'd* like it?"

Joan opened her mouth in consternation.

"I never thought of that!" she gasped.

"After all," said the Earl, deriving infinite satisfaction from the knowledge that for once he was master of the situation, "after all, he may have his feelings. Burglars may consider themselves a cut above the new poor——"

"Please don't be absurd, Father! Who would tell him?"

"Anyway, it was a foolish thing to do, because this Hamon man will be coming round and bothering me about it. And nobody knows better than you, Joan, that I hate being bothered."

"You can tell him you know nothing about it—which is true. You can also say that I am my own mistress, which is also true."

The old man gulped down his coffee.

"Perhaps he won't come," he said hopefully, but he had not risen from the table when Ralph Hamon's loud knock announced his arrival.

"I'm not in!" said Lord Creith hastily. "Tell him I'm out, Joan . . ."

He made a hasty and somewhat undignified exit.

She walked into the drawing-room to find a fuming Hamon stalking up and down the carpet. He spun round as she opened the door.

"What is this story that Lydia tells me?" he stormed.

The change in him was remarkable. At the best he was an unpleasant-looking man—now she shuddered to see him. His jaw was out-thrust, his eyes blazed with anger.

"So you know Morelake, do you?—you're Jane Smith!" he pointed an accusing finger at her, and her calm nod seemed to infuriate him.

"Joan, I've told you before—I tell you again that you are the only woman in the world for me. I will have you—and nobody else. I'd kill him and you too rather! If this is true, I'll never leave him till he's dead!"

She did not flinch, and in her quiet disdain the tortured man

thought her never so beautiful. Slim and white, a fragile thing of youth, with her child face and the figure that was nearly woman. His hands went out toward her instinctively, but she did not move.

"I know a dozen men who would take you by the collar and throw you out of this house if they knew a half of what you said."

Her voice was steady: she showed no trace of that agitation which he expected.

"If I am misinformed——" he began huskily.

"You are. It was a stupid joke on my part to tell your sister that I was engaged, but I disliked her so; she was so horribly common with her affectations and her talk of the aristocrats she knew—such a feminine edition of you, Mr. Hamon. I could imagine her screaming at me, as you have been screaming. A wretched virago shrieking me down."

She had left the door open as she came in, and Peters, she knew, was in the hall.

"Peters," she called, and the butler came in. "Show Mr. Hamon out; he is not to be admitted either to this house or Creith."

Peters bowed, and, his eyes upon Ralph Hamon, jerked his head to the door.

It was one of the happiest moments of his life.

CHAPTER XVII

Gentle Julius

Colonel Carter, of the Criminal Investigation Bureau, took his cigar from his mouth in order to smile the more comfortably.

"My dear Welling, you are romantic, and because you are romantic you ought to have been a failure. Instead of which,

by some mysterious dispensation of providence, you are a very successful detective officer. Romance plays no part in our work; there is nothing romantic about crime. A is a thief, with peculiar but well-known methods; B is a stolid, unimaginative police officer who, called into a case of burglary, larceny, anything you like, finds that the crime has been committed by somebody who employs the methods of A. Perhaps A makes a hobby of forcing kitchen windows, or using chance-found ladders, or is in the habit of taking a meal after the robbery is committed. Anyway, there are characteristics of A. So B arrests him, and generally he is right. You, on the other hand, would find, in the remnants of a stolen meal, proof that the robber was starving and would look for a hungry-looking, left-handed man!"

Julius Welling, Chief of the 8th Bureau, sighed. He was an elderly, white-haired man with a sad face and a trick of rubbing his nose when he was embarrassed.

"You've won through, heaven knows how," mumbled Carter through his cigar. "Maybe it is luck—maybe inspiration."

"You have omitted all the possibilities of genius," said the other gently.

In the service which he had adorned for thirty-five years they christened him "Gentle Julius." His rank was equivalent to a Chief Constable, for every promotion that could come to a successful police officer had been his, and on the rare occasions that he wore a uniform, his decorations ran in three straight rows from buttons to shoulder.

Jackson Carter and he had entered the service on the same day, the former an office man with a peculiar gift for organisation, the other so immersed in his study of men and women that he scarcely noticed the passing of the years that brought him so much honour.

"As I say, you're a romantic old dog," said Carter, on his favourite theme, which was very nearly his only recreation, the baiting of his lifelong friend. "Though I admit—and this is very handsome of me—that your dreamings have sometimes led you to queer results."

Julius Welling smiled with his eyes.

"Where will my present dream lead me to?" he asked.

"To failure," said the other seriously. "We've got The Black—there is no doubt about it. I wish somebody else than Marborne had got him, for I had sharpened the toe of my right boot for him, but there is the luck of the game; Marborne has caught him. We have all the evidence we want. Apart from the fact that he was taken in the act, the burglar's kit and gun we found on him, a whole lot of stuff has been discovered in his flat in Bond Street. A parcel of money marked with the stamp of the Home Counties Bank——"

"I could get that by applying to the Home Counties," murmured Mr. Welling.

"A cash box buried in his garden——"

"Why should he bury a cash box in his garden?" asked the other plaintively. "Only amateur crooks do that sort of thing."

"Well, how did it get there?" asked the exasperated Carter.

Mr. Welling rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"It may have been planted there to get a conviction," he suggested. "Marborne caught Shellman, the banknote forger, that way."

The chief stared at him.

"Do you mean it was a frame-up?" he asked, and Welling nodded.

"The particular charge on which he was convicted was faked. I've known it for some time. Shellman, of course, was a forger, too clever to be caught. The charge on which he went down for ten years was undoubtedly framed for him, and Marborne did the framing."

"That is news to me," said the other with a frown.

"As to this Morlake man," Mr. Welling advanced his views with characteristic timidity, "doesn't the story he tells sound rather fishy? He says that his servant was ill—the servant lives at Blackheath, remember. He comes to the house and is suddenly bludgeoned. Taken unawares and bludgeoned—and he is supposed to carry a gun! He comes to burgle a house and leaves his car at a corner of the street with all the lights on, when there is a lane not half-a-dozen yards away where the car could be hidden? He is supposed to have broken in at the back of the

house, where there is a garden and an easy wall that would get him into open country, and yet he escapes by the front door! He 'shows fight'—how? Never forget that he has a loaded pistol, yet he 'shows fight' to such purpose that Marborne has to take his 'stick' to him. What was his gun doing all this time?"

Colonel Carter shook his head.

"The story of the telephone call is a lie——"

"On the contrary it is true," said old Julius, almost apologetically. "The New Cross exchange heard the message. They were testing junction lines because a subscriber had reported a fault, and the engineers happened to be listening in on this particular junction when the call went through."

Colonel Carter opened his eyes.

"You've been working on this case?" he said. "You're not tailing The Black?"

Gentle Julius shook his head.

"I've been tailing Marborne," he said, more gently than ever. "You see, Jack, the chief holds about the same views as you concerning the inspector, and he put me on to see that he came to no harm. And the man who called up Morlake and told him the tale about the injured servant was the inspector. I want Marborne's coat for my exhibition of ex-officers' uniforms. And, Jack, noth'n's more certain than that I'll have it!"

"And what about Morlake?" asked Carter.

Gentle Julius spread out his lined hands in a gesture of indifference.

"They may convict him or they may not," he said; "but one thing I can tell you, and it is this. James Lexington Morlake *is* The Black, the cleverest bank smasher we've seen in twenty years. I've proof and more than proof of that, Jack."

He pursed his lips and his white brows met in a prodigious scowl.

"Ten years ago," he said, speaking with more than his ordinary deliberation, "the Haslemere police picked up a dying sailor on the Portsmouth Road."

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded the startled Carter.

"I'm talking about The Black," said Welling, "and why he's

a burglar—get that in your mind, Jack—a dying sailor with his life hammered out of him, and not a line or a word to identify him; a dying sailor that sleeps in a little churchyard in Hindhead, without a name to the stone that is over him. Ain't that enough to turn any man burglar?"

"You love a mystery, don't you, Julius?" asked his irritated friend, when Welling rose.

"Mysteries are my specialty," said Julius gently.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Trial

THE Central Criminal Court was crowded on the second and last day of the trial, when James Lexington Morlake came up the stairs that led into the large and roomy dock. The white court, with its oaken panels, was pleasing to Jim's discriminating eye; the scarlet and crimson of the judge's robes, the velvet and fur of the Sheriffs', the gold and red of the City Marshal—they harmonised perfectly.

The judge carried in his hand a tight bouquet of flowers and laid them on his desk. It was a far cry from the days of those fœtid courts when the judges carried disinfecting herbs, and an act of grim necessity had been translated through the ages into a pretty custom.

A little bob of the white-wigged head as the judge seated himself. He glanced casually at the prisoner, and, settling himself in his padded chair, waited for the concluding evidence of the last police witness.

Once or twice he leant forward to ask a question in a sharp, thin voice, but on the whole he seemed immeasurably bored, and when he concealed a yawn behind his hand, Jim sympathised with him.

"This is my case, my lord," said the prosecuting counsel as the last witness stepped down.

The judge nodded and glanced at Jim.

"Have you any witnesses to call, Morlake?" he asked.

Jim was not represented by counsel, and he had conducted his own cross-examination of the witnesses.

"No, my lord. I should have called the operator at the New Cross exchange, but the police have admitted that a message came through asking me to call at 12 Cranfield Gardens. From the known time that message came through, and the known hour of my arrest, it is clear that I could not have entered the house in the time. The police rely upon the fact that I was supposed to have been in possession of housebreaking tools and a pistol—neither the purchase nor former possession of which they have traced to me.

"The police in their evidence have told the jury that I am an expert burglar, and that I have robbed many banks——"

"They have stated that you are under suspicion, and the night watchman at the Burlington Safe Deposit has recognised your voice—that is all that has been said definitely concerning any previous crime you may have committed," interrupted the judge. "I take it that you are not going to the witness stand to give evidence on your own behalf?"

"That is so, my lord."

"Then this, I understand, is your speech for the defence? Very well."

Jim leant on the edge of the pen, his eyes fixed on the jury.

"Gentlemen, if it is true that I am a clever bank smasher, does it not occur to you that, in attempting to rob a dwelling-house in order to obtain jewellery of great historical but of little intrinsic value, I was acting in a blundering and amateurish fashion? Why should I, if, as is stated, I robbed the Burlington Safe Deposit of a large sum only a week ago? Gentlemen"—he leant forward—"you may accept as a fact that I *did* rob the Burlington!"

There was a stir in the court and a sudden hum of noise. Up in the public gallery a girl who had sat through the two days of trial, following every word with tense interest, began

twisting her handkerchief into a tighter ball, her heart beating a little faster.

"You need not and should not make any statement incriminating to yourself," the judge was warning the tall man in the dock.

"Nothing I have said will or can incriminate me," said Jim quietly. "I am merely asking the jury to accept the hypothesis that I am an expert burglar, in order that they may judge the probability of my breaking into the house in Cranfield Gardens. The police have insisted that I am responsible for these burglaries. So far as the laws of evidence would allow them, they have enveloped my life in a cloud of suspicion. Let me clarify the air, and admit that I am The Black, without specifying for which of these many burglaries I am responsible.

"Was the Blackheath robbery typical? Was there anything to gain, any necessity? Is it not more likely that the story of the telephone call was true, and that I was arrested by, let us say, the honest error of that admirable officer Inspector Marborne?"

Here he left the case to the prosecuting counsel and the judge. It was the latter whose speech counted.

"I have not the slightest doubt," said Mr. Justice Lovin, "that the accused James Morlake is a man of criminal antecedents. I have less doubt that he is the burglar who has gained unenviable notoriety as The Black. But the least doubt of all in my mind concerns his guilt in the charge which has been brought against him in this court and in this present case. The police evidence has been most unsatisfactory. I am not satisfied that either Marborne or Slone, who gave evidence, told the whole truth. There was here almost convincing proof of what is called in America a 'frame-up'—in other words, concocted evidence designed to deceive the court and to secure a conviction. I shall therefore direct you to return a verdict of not guilty. I will add . . ." He turned his stern eyes to the prisoner.

"I will add that, if ever James Lexington Morlake is convicted before me on a charge of burglary, I shall send him to penal servitude for life, believing that he is a menace to so-

ciety, and a man with whom no honest or scrupulous man or woman should consort."

For a second it seemed to the girl in the gallery that Jim Morlake shrank under the terrific denunciation, and his face went a shade paler. In an instant he had recovered, and, standing erect, heard the formal verdict of Not Guilty, and stepped down to freedom.

The people made way for him as he passed, eyeing him curiously. One white-haired man alone intercepted him.

"Glad you got off, Morlake."

Jim smiled faintly.

"Thank you, Mr. Welling—I know you mean it. It was a frame, of course."

"I guess so," nodded Welling gravely, and went toward the gloomy-faced Marborne, who was coming out of the court. "Heard the judge, Marborne, eh? Pretty bad, that?"

"He didn't know what he was talking about, sir," said the detective with an air of injured innocence. "I've never been so insulted in my life."

"And now *I'm* going to insult you," said Welling. "You're suspended from duty; that applies to you, Slone. Attend the C. C.'s office on Wednesday and bring your uniform in a bundle!"

Jim had watched the little scene interestedly, and guessed its significance. Very few people had come out of court, for the next case was a murder charge. The big marble hall was almost deserted as he slowly crossed toward the stairs.

"Excuse me."

He turned and met the eye of the waiting girl. She was plainly dressed and very pretty, and the gloved hand she held out to him trembled slightly.

"I'm so glad, Mr. Morlake! I'm so glad!"

He took her hand with a half smile.

"You were in court both days," he said. "I saw you in the corner of the gallery. I'm glad it is over—the old gentleman did not spare me, did he?"

She shivered.

"No . . . it was dreadful!"

He wondered what he ought to say or do. Her friendliness and sympathy touched him more than he dreamed was possible. He saw that she was lovely, and he wanted to stop and talk to her, but he had an uncomfortable sense of shyness.

"I hope," he said gently, "that you will not think too favourably of me. A distinguished criminal is very thrilling, but a very bad object of admiration."

He saw the smile trembling at the corner of her lips and felt unaccountably *gauche*.

"I'm not hero-worshipping, if that is what you mean," she said quietly. "I'm just being—awfully sorry for you! I don't think you're very sorry for yourself," and he shook his head.

Looking round, he saw that a policeman was eyeing him curiously from the doorway of the court, and in a desire to shield the girl from the consequences of what might well be a folly, he suggested:

"I think I'll go now."

It needed some courage to say what she had to say.

"Won't you come to tea somewhere?" she said, a little breathlessly. "There is a small restaurant in Newgate Street."

He hesitated.

"Yes—thank you," he said.

"You know, you owe me something," she said as they walked downstairs.

"Owe you?" he asked in surprise. "What do I owe you?"

"I once sent you a very important letter," said the girl.

He stared at her.

"You sent me a letter? What is your name?"

"I am Jane Smith," she said.

CHAPTER XIX

The Tea Shop

HALF in amazement, half amused, he stared at her.

"Jane Smith?" he repeated. "Are you the lady who wrote a letter warning me about Hamon?"

She nodded.

"Do you know him? Is he a friend of yours?"

"Oh, no." She shook her head vigorously. "But I have seen him; he sometimes comes to the village where I am staying —to Creith."

"Oh, you live at Creith? I don't remember having seen you there."

She smiled.

"I shouldn't imagine you know a soul in the village," she said drily. "You're not exactly sociable, are you? And anyway," she went on quickly, "you're hardly likely to call on people of our humble circumstances."

The "restaurant" proved to be a tea shop, which, at this hour of the day, was almost deserted, luncheon having been finished and the tea rush not having yet started. She took a seat at a table in the corner, and gave the order for tea in such a businesslike way that Jim Morlake guessed she was not unused to domestic management. He wondered who she was, and how it came about that he had not noticed so strikingly beautiful a girl.

"Have you lived at Creith long?"

"I was born there," said Jane Smith.

He ruminated for a few minutes, and then:

"How did you come to know that Hamon was plotting this frame-up?"

"I didn't know, I just guessed," she said. "A friend of mine lives at Creith House, and she has heard a great deal about Mr. Hamon."

Jim nodded.

"I owe Lord Creith something for his good intentions," he said, speaking half to himself and half to the girl, and smiled faintly. "I don't suppose his lordship would be very pleased if I called in person to thank him. He has a daughter, hasn't he?"

Jane Smith nodded.

"Somebody told me about her—a very pretty and a very wilful young lady, and, if I understand aright, somewhat romantic?"

Jane Smith's lips curled.

"I never heard that Lady Joan was romantic," she said, almost sharply. "I think she is a very practical, intelligent girl—she is certainly pretty, but that is no credit to her."

The tea came, and she busied herself pouring out for him. He watched her thoughtfully until she had finished and handed the cup to him. Suddenly her manner underwent a change.

"Mr. Morlake," she said seriously, "this has been a terrible lesson to you, hasn't it?"

"The trial?" he asked, and nodded. "Yes, it has been rather a lesson. I underrated Hamon, for one thing, and overrated the genius of the unscrupulous Mr. Marborne, for another. It was a very crude and stupid attempt to catch me."

She was looking at him steadily, her unwavering eyes fixed on his.

"You're not going to break the law any more, are you, Mr. Morlake?" she asked quietly. "You've been very—very successful. I mean you must have made a lot of money. It isn't necessary to take any further risks, is it?"

He did not reply. There was something about her that was familiar to him, something he recognised and which yet evaded him. Where had he seen her? Or was it her voice he recognised? Then:

"I know you," he said suddenly. "You were the girl who was knocked out by the storm!"

She went suddenly red.

"Yes," she confessed. "You didn't see my face."

"I remember your voice: it is one of those peculiarly sweet voices that are very difficult to forget."

He was not being complimentary or offensive, but the colour deepened in her face.

"You said you were a visitor, too. How could you be a visitor if you live in the village?"

"Jane Smith" recovered herself instantly.

"I told a lie," she said coolly. "I find lying is the easiest way out of most difficulties. If you must know, Mr. Morlake, I was in service at the Hall."

"A servant?" he said incredulously.

She nodded.

"I am a parlourmaid," she said calmly, "and a very good parlourmaid."

"Of that I am sure," he hastened to say, and then he looked at her hands, and she was thankful that she was wearing her gloves. "So that is how you knew, eh? Well, I'm very much obliged to you, Miss Smith. Are you still at the Hall?"

She shook her head.

"I lost my job," she said mendaciously, and added: "Through being out so late on the night of the storm."

And then, her conscience beginning to prick her, she turned the conversation to safer channels.

"You are not going to be a burglar any more, are you?" To her amazement, he smiled.

"But surely not!" she gasped. "After your terrible escape, and all that the judge said! Oh, Mr. Morlake, you wouldn't be such a fool!"

This time he laughed aloud.

"It is evident to me, young lady, that you do not estimate the joys and thrills of a burglar's life, or you would not ask me so light-heartedly to give up what is something more than a recreation and a means of livelihood. The judge was certainly fierce! But really, I don't take much notice of judges and what they say. The chances are that, by the peculiar system obtaining in England, I shall never go before that judge—there are half-a-dozen who try cases at the Old Bailey, and possibly, on my next appearance, I shall meet a kind and humanitarian soul who will dismiss me with a caution."

His quizzical eye and bantering tone awakened no response in the girl. She was troubled, almost hurt, by his obduracy.

"But isn't there anybody"—she hesitated—"who could persuade you? Somebody who is very dear to you, perhaps? A relation or—a—a girl?"

He shook his head.

"I have no relatives or friends in the world," he said; "and if that sounds pathetic, I beg of you to believe that I feel no particular sorrow that I am so unencumbered. It is very kind of you, Miss Smith"—his voice and his tone softened—"and

I do appreciate the thought that is behind your request. But I must go on in my own way, because my own is the only way to peace of mind. And now I think you have been too long in a criminal's company, and I'm going to send you home. Are you living in London?"

"Yes, I live here—I mean, I have friends here," she said, somewhat confused.

"Then off you go to your friends."

He paid the bill, and they walked out of the shop together. Suddenly, to his surprise, she turned and walked back to the shop again and he followed her.

"There is a man I don't want to see," she said breathlessly, and, looking through the window, he saw Mr. Ralph Hamon striding savagely along the sidewalk, and watched him turn into an office building, his whole attitude betraying the wrath which the acquittal of James Morlake had aroused.

CHAPTER XX

A Caller

Ralph Hamon's business activities were many, his interests varied. The high, narrow-fronted office block in which were housed his various enterprises rejoiced in the name of Morocco Building, for Mr. Hamon's interests were mainly centred in that country. Here were the head offices of the Rifi Concession, the Marakash Lead Mines, Moroccan Explorations, and half-a-dozen other incorporated concerns.

He slammed through the outer office, his face black with anger. The trial he had not attended, deeming it expedient to keep away from the precincts of the court, but the result of the case had come through on the tape machine at his club, and as the words "Not Guilty" were spelt out before his outraged eyes, Mr. Hamon's wrath had flamed to red heat.

It was incredible, monstrous. And yet he had been warned by Marborne that the case was not going so well against his enemy as he could have wished. The discovery by the police (it was not Marborne who had made this) that a call had been put through summoning Morlake to Blackheath, had made all the difference between conviction and acquittal. So satisfied was Hamon, who knew little of the processes of the law, and regarded a man as doomed from the moment a policeman's hand fell upon his shoulder, that a conviction would follow, that he scouted the possibility of Morlake escaping. And now the dreadful fact stared him in the face. Jim Morlake was free. The old struggle was to be continued, the old menace revived.

Mr. Hamon's office had something of the air of a boudoir, with its thick carpet and tapestried furniture. A faint aroma of cedar hung in the air, for he favoured the heavy perfumes of France. Pushing aside the accumulation of correspondence which his clerk brought in, he dismissed him with a curse.

"There are three cables from Sadi, sir," said his secretary, standing at the entrance of the room, ready to make a more hasty retreat.

"Bring them in," growled Hamon.

He read and, with the aid of a book he took from his desk, decoded the messages, and apparently they did not add to his pleasure, for he sat huddled up in his chair, his hands stuffed in his pockets, a scowl on his face, for a quarter of an hour, until, reaching out for the telephone, he gave the number of his house in Grosvenor Place.

"Tell Miss Lydia I want to speak to her," he said, and when, after an exasperating delay, he heard her voice: "Put the connection through to my study," he said in a low voice. "I want to talk to you privately. Morlake has been acquitted."

"Really!" asked the languid voice.

"And cut out that 'reahly'!" he snarled. "This isn't the time for any of your fancy society stuff! Get that connection through."

There was a click, and after a few seconds her voice called him again.

"What is wrong, Ralph? Does it make much difference—Morlake getting off?"

"It makes all the difference in the world," he said. "You've got to get at him, Lydia. I never thought it would be necessary, but it is! And, Lydia, that trip of yours to Carlsbad is off. I may have to go to Tangier, and I shall want you to come with me."

He heard her exclamation of concern, and grinned to himself.

"You said you would never ask me to go back there," she said, almost plaintively. "Ralph, is that necessary? I'll do anything you ask me, but please don't let me go back to that dreadful house."

There was no affectation in her voice now; she was very sincere, very earnest, pleading almost.

"I'll see," he said. "In the meantime, you wait for me; I'll be back in half-an-hour."

He put down the receiver and hastily ran through the smaller pile of correspondence on his desk which called for personal attention, marking a letter here and there, putting a few into his pocket to answer at his leisure. He was on the point of ringing for his clerk, when that harassed individual appeared in the doorway.

"I can't receive anybody," snapped Hamon, seeing the card in the man's hand.

"He says——"

"I don't care what he says; I can't see anybody. Who is it?"

He snatched the card from the clerk's hand, and read:

Captain Julius Welling.
Criminal Investigation Bureau.

Ralph Hamon bit his lip. He had heard of Welling in a vague way. Once or twice Marborne had made an uncomplimentary reference to the Chief of the 8th Bureau, from which he gathered that Welling was both honest and efficient. Why should Welling want to see him, he wondered.

"Show him in," he said curtly, and Julius Welling was ushered into the room.

Hamon was taken aback to find a man much older than he had expected; a mild-looking, white-haired gentleman, with a slight stoop and a deferential manner. He looked less like a policeman than any man Mr. Ralph Hamon had seen.

"Won't you sit down, Captain Welling?" he said. "Can I be of any service to you?"

"I thought I'd just call in," said Julius gently. "I happened to be passing—you're very handily situated here, Mr. Hamon—only a few yards from the Central Criminal Court."

Hamon shifted uncomfortably as this dubious advantage was pointed out to him.

"I suppose you weren't in court for the trial of Morlake?" said Julius, depositing his hat carefully upon the ground and hanging his short umbrella on the edge of the desk.

"No," said the other curtly, "I was not very much interested in the case."

"*Weren't* you now?" said Julius. "I had an idea you were. Now, how did I get that into my head?"

His mournful eyes were fixed upon the other, and Hamon grew uncomfortable under the glance.

"I suppose I was, in a sense," he admitted. "This fellow has been a nuisance to me for years. And of course, as you know, I was able to supply some valuable information to the police."

"Not to the police," said Julius, "but to Inspector Marborne—which I admit, at first glance, looks to be the same thing, but which isn't. A queer man, Mr. Morlake, don't you think?"

"All criminals are queer, I understand," said Hamon, and the other nodded slowly.

"All criminals are queer," he agreed. "Some are queerer than others. And quite a lot of people are queer who aren't criminals; have you noticed that, Mr. Hamon? He has a Moorish servant—Mahmet; and I understand that he speaks Arabic rather well. For the matter of that, you speak the language also; isn't that so?"

"I speak the Moorish Arabic, yes," said Hamon shortly.

"Dear me!" mused Gentle Julius, gazing out of the window. "Isn't that a remarkable coincidence? Both you men have an

association with Morocco. You've floated a number of companies with a Moorish end to them, haven't you, Mr. Hamon? Of course you have; I needn't have troubled to ask you that question, because all the information I require is in the Stock Exchange Year-book. The Marakash Company now; that was to exploit some oil wells which existed in the desert of Hari. There was a desert, but there was no oil, if I remember rightly, and you went into liquidation."

"There was oil, but the wells went dry," corrected Hamon.

"And Morlake—was he interested in Moorish finances? He lived there for some time, I understand. Did you meet him?"

"I never met him—I saw him once," said the other, shortly. "I know he lived there. But Tangier is the sink into which all the refuse of Europe flows."

Julius agreed with a nod.

"That is so," he said. "Do you remember the Rifi Diamond Syndicate? I think you floated that about twelve years ago?"

"That also went into liquidation," said Hamon.

"I'm not thinking so much about the company, and what happened to the company, as of the shareholders."

"You needn't think about them at all, because I was the only shareholder," said Hamon roughly. "If you have come in to make enquiries about my companies, Captain Welling, I'd be very glad if you wouldn't beat about the bush, but tell me plainly what you want to know."

"I want to know nothing," Julius put out his hands in a gesture of deprecation. "I have reached the age, Mr. Hamon, when a man loves to gossip. Dear, dear, dear! It doesn't seem so many years ago that I saw the prospectus of the Rifi Diamond Syndicate and heard about the wonderful stones that had been taken out of that mine, about forty-five miles south-west of Tangier. Did you catch many suckers on that?"

The air of the question was so innocent, the bland voice so even, that for a moment Hamon did not realise its offensiveness.

"What do you mean—suckers?" he stormed. "I tell you none of the shares were issued, or, if they were, none were taken up. Not a penny came from the public. And if you doubt my word,

you can see the books. An article appeared in one of the London financial papers, attacking the Syndicate and calling into question the *bona-fides* of the vendors, and sooner than have the slightest scandal attaching to my name, I washed my hands of the whole affair."

"And not a share was issued," said Mr. Welling.

Hamon's attitude was tense; he seemed suddenly to have grown old.

"Not a share," he said defiantly.

Julius Welling sighed, gathered up his umbrella and hat, and rose stiffly to his feet.

"Gracious me!" he said in his mild way. "Then the whole thing is an inexplicable mystery! For, if no shares were issued, why is James Morlake on your trail, Hamon? Why for ten years has he been robbing banks? Why is he a burglar?"

Julius walked to the door, opened it and turned for his final shot.

"Ever meet a sailor on the Portsmouth Road, Hamon?" he drawled, and, as the man staggered under the shock: "You don't meet them often nowadays; they go by railroad! It is safer: there's less chance of being clubbed to death on the cars than on the lonely Portsmouth Road. Think that over!"

CHAPTER XXI

A Volume of Emerson

How much did the old man know, he wondered. Had Morlake told him?

His mind went back to a sunny day in Morocco, and to two men who rode on mule back across the desert toward the blue line of the Rifi Hills. He had been one of these; his guest, a man without a name, had been the other; and as they climbed a sandy slope, a young man had come riding toward them at a

gallop and had drawn rein to watch them after they had passed. It was the first time Hamon had ever seen James Lexington Morlake.

And he remembered that he had had a wild and insensate impulse to turn upon the man who was looking after them, and shoot him down. It was one of those atavistic urges which come to civilised men whose animal instincts had not wholly atrophied. The watcher stood for danger—Ralph Hamon brought his hand mechanically to his hip where a gun had hung, and then, with an effort, he merged from the tangle of his dreams and went out to the office, to find his bored secretary waiting.

"I am going now," he said gruffly. "Come to my house tomorrow morning: I shall not be at the office all day. Bring any personal letters and cables."

He had forgotten another person who was waiting, until he was nearly home.

"You told me you were coming straight back," said Lydia furiously, for patience did not appear amongst her known virtues. "I have a dinner engagement with Lady Clareborough. I can give you five minutes."

She was resplendent in evening dress, and he looked at her stupidly.

"You can give me five minutes, can you? Well, I guess that'll be long enough," he said. "Lydia, you don't know this man, Morlake?"

"Morlake?" she said wearily. "Haven't we finished with him?"

"The question is, whether he has finished with me," said Hamon.

The hand that brushed back his scant locks trembled slightly.

"That is the question—whether he's finished with me. You've got to get acquainted with that man. I don't care what money you spend; I don't care how you get to know him. You can see him as soon as you like. But I want to patch up some sort of peace with him, and I think you're more likely to do the trick than I am. You're clever, and you've a good invention. He may be the sort of man who'll fall for a woman like you—there are very few men who wouldn't," he said.

She sighed with elaborate patience.

"What do you mean by 'fall for me'? Do you mean that he'd marry me, or fall in love with me, or what?"

"I don't care what he does so long as you can persuade him to cut out this little vendetta of his."

"Won't the law cut it out?" she asked significantly. "I read the account of the trial and the judge's remarks, and it seems to me that you're going to give yourself a lot of trouble. Besides, Ralph, I do not intend jeopardising the position I've won for myself by making up to a convicted burglar—he's as good as convicted. I have my friends to think of."

There was a steely look in his eye as he interrupted her.

"Go to your dinner, my good girl," he said harshly. "I thought you'd got that social bug out of your head."

She opened her mouth to retort, but the suppressed malignity in his glare silenced her.

Lydia Hamon knew when to quit.

Ralph Hamon was a rich man, with the soul of a miser. He was the kind that treasures odd scraps of useless things, in the hope that one day they may come in handy. His wardrobe overflowed with ancient and almost threadbare clothing that he would not give away. It was his practice in his own home to shed himself of the immaculate attire in which he appeared in public, and take a little further wear out of clothing which had already rendered more than its normal service. He never wasted a scrap of paper if writing space was left upon it; and when people wrote to him on double sheets, he invariably tore off that which had not been used and employed it for note-making.

Jim Morlake had vividly illustrated this weakness when he told him the parable of the monkey and the gourd. Not only was it a weakness, but it promised to be fatal. All that was sane in Ralph Hamon told him to make a fire of one scrap of paper that was in his possession; and yet, though he had made up his mind a dozen times, he was physically incapable of applying a match to its corner.

The library where he worked was on the first floor of the house in Grosvenor Place, and looked out upon a dreary court-

yard and the roofs of a string of garages. Though he was nc great reader, three of the walls were covered with bookcases filled with conventional volumes. Any student of human nature would have known that the books had been "furnished" without any respect to their literary quality. There was the inevitable twelve volumes of Scott, the usual encyclopædias, the sets of mid-Victorian authors' works. They were bound in harmony with the room, and their exterior satisfied the eye of the financier, even if their contents made no appeal to him.

There was one book, however, which he had often occasion to take down from a narrow section of the bookshelf covered by glass doors. In this protected area was, amongst other works, a volume of Emerson's Essays, a somewhat portly collection flanked by Hazlitt and volumes of Addison's "Spectator." Slipping the room door bolt into its socket and drawing the curtains, Hamon opened the case and took this handsome volume, which was heavier than a book should be, for he had to use both hands to lift it from the shelf and carry it to the table.

Even now it might be mistaken by the uninitiated for an ordinary volume, for the binding was skilfully imitated and even the marbled edge of the leaves had been reproduced. Selecting a key from a bunch which he carried at the end of a long chain in his pocket, Hamon thrust it between the cover and the "pages" and turned it, and, pulling back the cover, he disclosed a shallow box half filled by papers. The book was of solid armoured steel, and was the repository for such papers as Hamon wished to have near him.

One of those he took out and laid on the desk, looking down at the closely written statement it contained. There was nothing in the words he read but was to his disadvantage. There was imprisonment and possibly death in every line. There was not one word that did not damn him, body and soul, for what he was; and yet, when he took out his matchbox and struck a light with trembling fingers, he hesitated, and finally flung the match into the fireplace and replaced the square paper in the box.

There was a knock at the door, and, hastily shutting down the lid, he pushed the "book" back amongst its fellows, and closed the glass door.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Will you see Mr. Marborne?" asked the servant in a low voice.

"Yes. Ask him to come in."

He slipped back the bolt and went out on to the landing to meet the disgruntled detective.

"Well, you've made a mess of it, Marborne," he said sourly.

"It's made a mess of me, I can tell you, Hamon," said the other. "I have been asked to turn my coat in. I wish I had never troubled with this damned Morlake."

"There's no sense in bleating," said Hamon impatiently. "What do you mean by 'turning in your coat'?"

He took a bottle of whisky and a syphon from a cupboard and deposited them on his desk.

"Welling told me to do it, and I expect I'm finished. And, anyway, I should have been in bad odour after what the judge said about police methods. You've got to find me a job, Hamon."

"Oh, I have, have I?" sneered the other, pausing with a glass in each hand. "I've *got* to find you a job! Now isn't that the coolest bit of nerve!"

"I don't know who's got the nerves, you or me," said the inspector gruffly, "but——"

"Don't let's quarrel." Hamon poured a frugal portion of whisky into the glass and set the syphon sizzling. "I daresay we can find a place for you; I happen to want a man in Tangier to look after some of my interests. It was not I who got you into trouble, my friend, it was Mr. James Lexington Morlake."

"Damn him!" said Marborne, and swallowed the toast and the contents of the glass at a gulp.

"That's pretty good whisky," suggested Hamon.

"I hardly tasted it," was the reply.

Marborne seated himself at the desk, took out his pocket book and found a sheet of paper, which he opened.

"I have made out a list of my expenses in this business," he said. "Here they are."

He handed them across to the other, and Hamon winced as he read the total.

"That's a bit stiff," he said. "I didn't authorise you to incur this expenditure."

"You told me to spend as much as I liked," said the detective.

"Why, that's nearly a thousand!" spluttered Hamon. "What am I—a child in arms?"

"I don't care what you are, you'll settle that," said the man. "There's a cut for Slone."

"You seem to forget that I've paid you money already——" Hamon began, when there was an interruption.

The butler came to the door and whispered something which Marborne could not catch.

"Here?" said Hamon quickly.

"Yes, sir, downstairs."

Hamon turned to his visitor. His anger had departed.

"He's downstairs," he said.

"He—who?" asked the startled detective. "Do you mean Morlake?"

Hamon nodded.

"You'd better stay here. I'll see him. Leave the door ajar. If there's any fuss, come down."

Jim Morlake was waiting in the hall, and Hamon greeted him with the greatest cordiality.

"Come right in, Morlake," he said, opening the door of the drawing-room. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to read that you were acquitted."

Jim did not answer until he was in the room and the door was shut.

"I've decided to drop my nefarious career, Hamon," he said, coming straight to the point.

"I think you're wise," said the other heartily. "Now is there anything I can do——"

"There's one thing you can do, and that is to give me a certain document, signed by the man with whom I saw you in Morocco some twelve years ago."

"Suppose I had it," said the other after a pause, "do you think I should be fool enough to give it to you, to place my—my liberty in your hands?"

"I would give you ample time to get out of the country, and I would agree not to support the charge made in that document. And without my support and my evidence, the case against you would fall to the ground. At any rate, you would have ample time to get to another country."

Hamon laughed harshly.

"I've no intention of leaving England," he said, "and certainly not now, on the eve of my wedding. I am marrying Lady Joan Carston."

"She has my sympathy," said Jim. "Isn't she Lord Creith's daughter?"

Hamon nodded.

"She'll not marry you without knowing something about you."

"She knows everything about me that she should know."

"Then I must tell her a little that she shouldn't," said Jim. "But your matrimonial adventures are entirely beside the point. I've come to give you a chance, and, incidentally, to save myself a lot of trouble and the serious consequences which would follow a certain line of action on my part. I want that document, Hamon."

Again Hamon laughed.

"You're chasing the wind," he said contemptuously. "And as to this precious document, it has no existence. Somebody has been jollying you and playing upon your well-known simple heart. Now listen, Morlake: can't we settle our differences like gentlemen?"

"I could settle *my* differences like a gentleman," said Jim, "because I happen to have been born that way. But you'll never settle yours, except like a cheap, swindling crook who has climbed over ruined homes to his present heights of prosperity. This is your last chance, and possibly mine. Give me that statement, and I will let up on you."

"I'll see you in hell first," said the other savagely. "Even if I had it—which I haven't——"

Jim nodded very slowly and thoughtfully.

"I see. The monkey's hand remains in the gourd; he's too

greedy to let go." He turned to the door and raised a solemn forefinger. "I warned you, Hamon," he said, and went out.

Hamon closed the door on him and went up the carpeted stairs to the library.

"Well, our friend is still truculent," he said, but he spoke to an empty room.

Marborne had gone. Hamon rang the bell for the butler.

"Did you see Mr. Marborne go?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, he went a few seconds ago—in fact, just before you came from the drawing-room. He seemed rather in a hurry."

"That is very strange," said Hamon, and dismissed the servant.

Then he saw the sheet of paper on the desk with its scribbled message.

If you won't pay my bill, perhaps you'll pay a bigger one [it read].

Hamon scratched his chin. What was the meaning of that cryptic message? Written, he noticed, on his best notepaper. Evidently Marborne was piqued about the questioning of his account, and had gone away in a fit of temper. Hamon shrugged his shoulders and sat down at his desk. He had no time to worry about the pettishness of his tools.

Happening to glance round, he noticed that the door of the glass-fronted bookcase was ajar, and he could have sworn that he had closed it. And then, with an oath, he leapt to his feet.

The steel "book" was in its place, but the title was upside down. Somebody had moved it. He pulled it down and tried the lid, and, to his horror, it opened. He had forgotten to lock it.

He turned over the papers with a trembling hand. The fatal statement was gone!

With a howl of rage he leapt to the door and yelled for the butler.

"Which way did Marborne go?" he asked quickly.

"He went to the right, sir, toward Grosvenor Square," said the butler from the bottom of the stair.

"Get me a taxi—quick!"

Hamon went back into his room, replaced the papers that he had tossed from the box, locked it and pushed it between the books. A minute later, a taxicab was taking him to Mr. Marborne's lodgings.

Marborne had not returned, the landlady told him, and had only that moment telephoned through to say that he would not be coming back that night, as he might be leaving for the Continent.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to go straight to Scotland Yard. The man was still a police officer, and would probably report to headquarters sooner or later. He had the good fortune to find Welling, and the old man seemed in no wise surprised at the visit.

"You want to see Marborne, eh? I'm afraid he's not on duty. I'm even more afraid that he will never be on duty again," said Julius. "Is it anything important?"

"Will he come here at all—to report, I mean?" asked Hamon breathlessly.

"He's certain to come," said the old man. "In fact, he has a very pressing engagement with the Chief Commissioner tomorrow morning."

"Has he any friends? Where does Slone live?"

Julius Welling adjusted his glasses and looked keenly at his visitor.

"You're in a great hurry to find him; is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Yes—no. Nothing of great importance to anybody but myself—and Marborne."

"Indeed!" said Julius politely.

He opened a book and found Slone's address, which he wrote on a piece of paper for the visitor.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, Captain Welling. I didn't expect you'd take this trouble," said Hamon.

"We always do what we possibly can for members of the public," said Julius in a hushed voice.

No sooner had his visitor left than he picked up the automatic telephone and switched to the hall.

"A man named Hamon is coming down," he said briskly. "Tell Sergeant Lavington to tail him up and not to lose sight of him. I want to know where he's going, and what the trouble is."

He put down the telephone and rubbed his thin hands gently together, a far-away look in his eyes.

"And I think there *is* trouble," he said, addressing the ceiling; "bad trouble."

CHAPTER XXII

Welcome Home

JIM MORLAKE had never driven quite so slowly as he did on his way home to Wold House. He could well imagine that Sussex society had been shocked to its depths. The vicars and the churchwardens, the squires and squireens, the heads of noble houses who, on the strength of their neighbourship, had offered him their hospitality, the villagers themselves, sticklers for propriety, would regard his arrest and the judge's remarks as something cataclysmic. He maintained a considerable style in the country. His house was a large one; he employed butler and housekeeper, a dozen maids, cooks and the like, and he had never been quite sure of the number of gardeners who were on his pay roll.

He smiled as he thought of the effect his appearance at the Central Criminal Court would have upon these worthy folk. They were well paid and excellently well treated. His butler, and the butler's wife, who was housekeeper, had grown tremulous in their gratitude for the little services which he had rendered them. What they were thinking now, he could not guess, as he had had no communication with Wold House since his arrest. He had instructed the local bank manager to pay their salaries and such monies as were necessary to carry on the

household, and in response he had received only one letter, from the gardener, asking whether it was his wish, in view of recent happenings, that the daffodil bulbs should be planted on the edge of the wood as he had ordered.

The gates of Wold House were open; he turned the car into the drive, and the solemn chauffeur, who was waiting for him, touched his cap respectfully and took charge of the machine with a certain grim thoroughness that was ominous.

Jim passed into his sitting-room. The butler bowed him in and opened the door of the sitting-room for him.

"Is everything all right, William?" asked Jim, as he slowly stripped his gloves and overcoat and handed them to the man.

"Everything is in excellent order, sir," said Mr. William Cleaver, and then: "I should like, at your earliest convenience, to have a word with you, Mr. Morlake."

"As soon as you like," said Jim, sensing the coming exodus. "Take my coat out and come back immediately."

The butler was ill at ease when he returned.

"The truth is, sir," he said, "I am going to ask you to release me from my engagement. And that—er—applies also to Mrs. Cleaver."

"You wish to leave me, eh? Don't you like the job?"

"It is a very excellent situation," said Cleaver precisely, but withal nervously; "only I find the country does not agree with me, sir, and I have been offered an excellent situation in town."

"Very good," said Jim curtly.

He unlocked the drawer of his desk, opened the cash-box and took out some money.

"Here is your salary to date."

"When would it be convenient for me to go?" asked the butler.

"Now," was the laconic reply. "There is a train to your beloved 'town' in an hour, by which time you will be out of this house. You understand, Cleaver?"

"Yes, sir," said the discomfited servant. "There have been other—er—applications, but I have refused to deal with them."

"I see." Jim nodded. "Send in the eager applicants, please."

First came the cook, a stout woman but genteel to her finger-

tips, being an earnest Christian and a member of the Established Church.

"I want to give in my notice, sir."

"Why?" asked Jim bluntly.

"Well, the fact is, my niece is ill and I want to go to her."

"You mean you want to leave at once?"

"I don't want to put you to any inconvenience," the woman hastened to state, "and to oblige you——"

"Oblige nothing," said Jim Morlake. "You will leave now. If your niece is ill, she'll probably be dead by the time your month's notice has expired. Here are your wages."

There came a long procession of them: a parlour-maid, slightly tearful, and obviously acting under the instructions of her rigid parents; another, a little self-righteous and inclined to lift her nose at the very thought of serving a criminal; last came the groom and the chauffeur. Each offered a reason why they wanted to leave in a hurry, but only one spoke the truth. Some had relatives ill, some had been offered good situations; one, at least, hinted at an approaching marriage and the desire to devote the time to "getting things together." Neither man nor woman stated in precise language why he or she was leaving Wold House. None, until a little kitchenmaid, smutty of face and squat of figure, stood before the desk, her big hands on her hips.

"Why are you leaving, Jessie?" asked Jim.

"Because you're a burglar," was the blunt reply, and, leaning back in the chair, he shook with silent laughter.

"I think there is two pounds due to you. Here are five. And may I, a real live burglar, salute you as the only honest member of this little community? Don't look at that note as though it would bite you: it hasn't been forged and it hasn't been stolen."

At last they had gone, all of them, their corded trunks loaded upon a wagon which he had had brought up from the village by telephone, and he walked at its tail and, closing the gates behind the final load, returned to his empty house.

To bring down Binger was worse than useless, besides which, he needed him in London; and Mahmet, though an

excellent brewer of coffee, would certainly fail in all other branches of the culinary art. He wandered through the deserted house from kitchen to attic. It was spotlessly clean, and would remain so for a day or two.

"There's only one thing for a sensible man to do," he told himself, and that was to go back to London.

But he was too much of a fighter to shirk even the petty challenge which his domestic staff had thrown out to him. He went down to the lower regions and took stock of the larder. He sought bread and butter and tea. He could have got along without either, but he wanted to know just where he stood.

The principal shop in the village was Colter's Store, which supplied most things, from horse feed to mangles. As his car drew up before the shop, he saw through the window an excited young man pointing, and the bearded Mr. Colter emerged from his tiny office at the end of the counter. Jim got down from the car at leisure and strolled into the shop.

"Good morning," he said. "I want you to send some bread up to Wold House, and a couple of pounds of butter. I think I shall also want some eggs."

Mr. Colter pushed his assistant out of his way and confronted his customer from the other side of the counter, and there was a light in Mr. Colter's eyes which spoke eloquently of his righteousness.

"I'm not sending bread or anything else up to your house, Mr. Morlake," he said. "I've kept my hands clean of tainted money all my life, and I'm not going to start truckling with thievery and burglary at my time of life!"

Jim took the cigar from between his lips, and his eyes narrowed.

"Does that mean that you refuse to serve me?"

"That's just what it means," said Mr. Colter, glaring at him through his powerful spectacles. "And I'll tell you something more, Mr. Morlake: that the sooner you take your custom and yourself from Creith, the better we shall like it."

Jim looked round the store.

"You do a fairly big trade here, don't you, Colter?" he asked.

"An honest trade," said Mr. Colter emphatically.

"I mean, this business is worth something to you? I'll buy it from you."

Mr. Colter shook his head, and at that moment his stout partner, who had been a silent audience of the encounter, emerged from the door leading into the parlour.

"We don't want your money; we neither sell nor buy," she said shrilly. "It's quite enough to have burglars living like gentlemen, without their trying to corrupt decent, honest, God-fearing people."

"Oh, I'm glad there's somebody you fear," said Jim, and walked out of the house.

His bank was almost opposite, and bankers have few prejudices.

"Glad to see you got out of your trouble, Mr. Morlake," said the manager briskly. "By the way, the police examined your account—you know that?"

"And failed to find any connection between my various robberies and my unbounded affluence," smiled Jim. "Now listen, friend: the last time I was here, you were trying to induce me to take an interest in village house property. I notice that the store next to Colter's is empty."

The manager nodded.

"It fell in under a mortgage. The owner tried to run a garage, but Creith doesn't lie on the road to anywhere, and he went broke in a month. Do you want to buy?"

"Name a price, and let it be reasonable. Imagine you're negotiating with the Archbishop of Canterbury, and forget that I am an opulent burglar," said Jim.

An hour later, he walked out of a lawyer's office the proprietor of the store.

At ten o'clock that night there arrived from London a young and energetic man.

"I 'phoned the Grocers' Association for you, and they tell me that you're something of a live wire."

"Undoubtedly I am," said the youth immodestly.

"There's a store next to Colter's in the village. I want you to take charge of that to-morrow morning; get in carpenters and

painters, and stock it with every article that Colter sells. Mark down all the prices twenty-five per cent. below his. Get a van and beat up the country for custom. If he lowers his price, you lower yours, you understand? But anyway, keep it a standard twenty-five under."

"That'll cost money," said the young man.

"You probably have never heard of me. My name is Morlake, and I am by profession a burglar. My capital is therefore unlimited," said Jim soberly. "If there is any need to bring new capital into the business, just notify me and I'll take my gun and a bag and raise debentures at the nearest bank."

He had biscuits, tea and a large slice of ham for dinner; for supper, he had biscuits and tea without the ham; and in the morning, when he went in search of a breakfast menu, he rejected all other combinations than tea and biscuits. It was a little monotonous, but satisfactory. In his shirt sleeves he swept his room and the hall, made his own bed, and scrubbed down the broad steps at the front of the house. He began to sympathise with the housemaids who had left him.

All day long, strange trolleys had been dashing into the village, and a small army of carpenters and painters from a neighbouring town, men who thought it no disgrace to work for sinners, but rather prided themselves upon the distinction of being in the employ of a gentleman who had figured at the Old Bailey, were working at top speed, to convert the drab and uninhabitable garage into a store. The live wire was tingling. Stocks were arriving every hour. Mr. Colter stood before his door, one hand in the pocket of his apron, the other fingering his beard.

"It will be a nine days' wonder," he said to an audience of his neighbours. "These here-to-day-and-gone-to-morrow people! Why, I've had competition and beat 'em this past thirty years!"

By the afternoon the printing had been delivered, and the neighbouring villages learnt of sensational and permanent reductions in the price of almost every commodity. Mr. Colter went to the police station to seek legal advice, and was referred to a lawyer by the police sergeant, who wasn't quite sure of his ground, and certainly had no knowledge of the legal aspect of

this undercutting process. It was the first time in his life he had ever paid a penny to a lawyer, but the occasion demanded extraordinary expenditure, and it did not seem to Mr. Colter that he received value for his money when he was told that he could do nothing.

"To talk about conspiracy is absurd," said the man of law. "There is nothing to prevent this new fellow from giving his goods away."

"But a burglar's money is behind this scandalous business!" wailed Mr. Colter.

"If it was a murderer, it would make no difference," said the lawyer with satisfaction.

Colter, after consultation with his wife, put on his coat and went up to Wold House. He found Jim in the hall, sitting on a stair with an array of silver at his feet which he was polishing.

"Sit down," said Jim politely, and Mr. Colter looked round. "You can sit on the floor, or you can go up one stair higher than me and sit there. I can hear you quite well, and it isn't necessary that I should see your face."

"Now see here, Mr. Morlake, I think this business has gone a bit too far. You know you're taking the bread and butter out of my mouth?"

"I know you denied me those self-same commodities," said Jim, "and others," he added.

"I am going to his lordship to-morrow. I am going to see if the Earl of Creith will allow one of his neighbours to be robbed of his livelihood. Not that you will," said Mr. Colter. "I have friends in this neighbourhood of forty years' standing! I've got the whole community behind me!"

"You watch 'em walk in front of you when the twenty-five per cent. reduction comes into operation!" said Jim.

"It's the most scandalous thing that has ever happened in the history of the world!" screamed the tradesman.

"You have forgotten the Massacre of the Huguenots," said Jim, "and Nero's lion parties, and a few other indelicate happenings."

Mr. Colter went back to the village, drew up a statement of his position, which was printed by a misguided stationer, and

distributed it to every house in the village—misguided because the next morning brought a letter from a Horsham lawyer demanding that the name of the printer's legal representative be sent him, as his client intended to commence an action for libel.

Tea and dry biscuits were beginning to pall on Jim, when he found, that same morning, an unexpected cache of eggs. He could not be bothered to light the kitchen fire; he found a stove and a supply of spirit, and this he set up in his somewhat untidy study. He had brewed the tea, and had laid the table with a copy of the morning newspaper, and set about cooking the eggs. He knew little about egg cooking, except that a certain amount of heat, a certain number of eggs and a frying-pan were requisite. The room was grey with smoke and pungent with the odour of a burnt pan when the unexpected visitor arrived.

She came through the open door and stood in the doorway, open-mouthed, watching his primitive essay in cookery.

"Oh, what are you doing?" she asked in consternation, and, running across the room, took the smoking abomination from his hand. "You have put no fat in the pan!" she said. "How can you expect to cook eggs without some kind of grease?"

He was speechless with amazement. The last person he expected to see at Wold House, in this moment of crisis, was Jane Smith. Yet Jane Smith it was, prettier than ever in her plain blue suit, her big white Peter Pan collar, and the little black hat.

"Where the dickens did you come from?"

"I came from the village," she said, wrinkling her nose with an expression of distaste. "Phew! Open the window."

"Why, don't you like eggs?"

"Did these eggs express any wish to be cremated?"

He made no move.

"I suppose you know——"

"I know everything." She blew out the spirit fire and put down the pan, then, taking off her coat and hat, she threw them on the sofa. "I have come to look after you," she said, "you poor American waif!"

CHAPTER XXIII

The New Housekeeper

OBEDIENTLY he carried down the spirit lamp, cups and saucers and cracked teapot to the kitchen, and stood in awe, watching her as she kindled a fire in the big kitchen range.

"Let me do that for you," he said.

"You ought to have volunteered hours ago," she reproached him, "but if you had, I shouldn't have allowed you. You would only have made a lot of smoke——"

"Fire lighting is an art: I never realised it till now. Does your mother know you're here?" he asked suddenly.

"I hope so," she said. "Mother is in heaven."

"Your father?"

"Father is in London, which is quite a different place. Look in the larder and see if you can find some lard."

"That seems to be the proper place for it," he said.

"Have you any milk?" she asked, when he returned with a large white and bulbous supply.

"We have no milk, but we've lots of preserved milk."

"Haven't you a cow?"

He shook his head.

"I'm not sure whether I have or whether I haven't. I've really never taken an interest in the details of my estate, but I'm under the impression that I am entirely cowless."

"Why do you stay here?" She was sitting on her heels before the crackling fire, looking up at him curiously. "Why didn't you go back to London? You've got a flat, haven't you?"

"I prefer staying here," he said.

"How lordly! I prefer staying here." She mimicked him. "You're going to starve to death here, my good man, and freeze to death too. You ought to know that the people of Creith would never consent to stain their white souls by contact with a gentleman with *your* seamy past! Get some servants from London: they're less particular. They have cinemas in London

that educate them in the finger nuances of criminality. Why don't you bring your man down—Binger?"

"Binger?" he said in surprise. "Do you know him?"

"I've spoken with him," she said. "When you were in durance I made a call on him, to see if there was anything I could do. It required a great deal of tact because I wasn't supposed to know that you were under arrest. I asked him where you were, and he said you were 'hout.'"

"Instead of which I was hin!" laughed Jim.

"Hout or hin, he was deliciously diplomatic. And I saw your Moor, and your beautiful room. Did you live in Morocco?"

"For a short time," he said.

She was busy with the eggs for a little while, and he saw she was thinking deeply.

"Of course, you know why this antagonism has sprung up in the village against you? It isn't wholly spontaneous, or due to the purity of Creith's morals. A week ago, Mr. Hamon came down and interviewed most of the leading tradespeople, and I believe he also saw your butler. I know, because my maid, who lives in the village——"

"Your what?" he asked sharply.

"Maid—it is short for maiden aunt," she said, not so much as dropping an eyelid. "My maiden aunt, who lives in the village and who is something of a gossip, told me."

"You were here, then?"

"No, I was in London at the time. She told me when I came back. There are your eggs."

"I couldn't possibly eat three," he protested.

"It is not intended that you should: one is for me," she replied.

She went into the hall and brought down a bag, and extracted a new loaf and a small oblong brick of butter.

"We will dine in the kitchen, because I feel more at home there," she said. "And after breakfast I am going to see what needs doing. I can only stay a few hours every day."

"Are you coming to-morrow?" he said eagerly.

She nodded, and he sighed his relief.

"The curious thing was that I didn't see you come at all,

though I was looking through the window and I had a good view of the drive."

"I didn't arrive by the road," she said. "I discovered a little foot bridge across the river that joins Creith Park and your meadows. Naturally, I still retain a certain amount of self-respect, so I came furtively."

He laughed at that.

"If you're trying to make me believe that you care two cents what the village is thinking of you, you're working on a hopeless job," he said. "What puzzles me is"—he hesitated—"you may be a villager: I daresay you are; in fact, you must be, otherwise you wouldn't know so much about the people. But that you're a member of the downtrodden working classes, I will never believe."

"Go and find the carpet-sweeper," she ordered, "and I will show you that, if I'm not downtrodden, I'm certainly a labourer."

It seemed to him that she had hardly been there ten minutes before she came to the study, dressed ready to go.

"You're not going already!" he gasped in dismay.

"Yes, I am," she nodded, "and you will be good enough to stay where you are and not attempt to follow me. And I also rely upon you that you do not ask any of your village acquaintances—which, I should imagine, are very few by now—who I am or who my relations are. I want to keep the name of Smith unsullied. It is a fairly good name."

"I know of none better," he said enthusiastically. "Good-night, Jane."

He held out a hand, and was unaccountably thrilled to see the faint pink that came to her face.

"There is one favour I'm going to ask you in return for my services, and it is that you call off your campaign of vengeance; in other words, that you leave poor Colter alone. He is acting according to his lights, and it isn't going to give you any great satisfaction to ruin him."

"I've been thinking of that to-day," said Jim a little ruefully, "and wondering exactly what I can do. I don't like to strike my colours and leave the enemy triumphant."

"He's not at all triumphant: the poor man's scared to death. I can tell you all his secret history. He has been speculating in oil shares, at the suggestion of Mr. Hamon (I expect Mr. Hamon has an interest in the company) and the poor man is on the verge of bankruptcy. You have only to open your store and run it for a week, to push him over the edge—plunk! That is vulgar," she added penitently, "but will you think it over, Mr. Morlake? I don't know whether you can afford to withdraw, but I think you can."

An hour after the girl had left, Jim walked down to the village and into Colter's Store. A very humble Mr. Colter hastened to discover his needs.

"I want bread, butter and eggs," said Jim firmly. "I want them delivered every morning, with a quart of milk and such other commodities as I require."

"Yes, sir," said the humble Colter. "This store of yours, Mr. Morlake, is going to ruin me—I've had three farmers here today; they are supposed to be thorough gentlemen and friends of mine, but they're holding up their winter buying until your shop is open. They say that isn't the reason, but I know 'em!"

"The store will never open so long as I have my eggs, butter, bread and milk," said Jim patiently. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," said the fervent storekeeper, and showed him to the door.

That night the young enthusiast was sent back to London after selling his stocks to Colter below cost price; and when Jim came down in the morning and opened the front door, he found Mr. Colter's boy sitting on the steps.

Jane Smith came late that morning, and something in her appearance arrested his attention.

"You've been crying," he said.

"No, I haven't. I've had very little sleep, that is all."

"You've been crying," he repeated.

"If you say that again, I won't stay. You're really annoying, and I never thought you would be that."

This silenced him, but he was worried. Had she got into some kind of scrape through this escapade of hers? He never troubled to believe that she was a housemaid. Probably she was

some poor relation of one of the big families in the neighbourhood. There were many little villas and tiny half-acre lots scattered about the countryside.

They were eating a rather dismal lunch together when he asked her plainly:

"Where do you live?"

"Oh, somewhere around," she said vaguely.

"Do you ever speak the truth, young woman?"

"I was the most truthful person in the world until I——" She checked herself suddenly.

"Until you——?" he suggested.

"Until I started lying. It is very easy, Mr. Raffles."

"Oh, by the way"—he remembered suddenly—"two of the housemaids of this establishment came and interviewed me this morning whilst you were making the beds. They want to come back."

"Don't have them," she said hastily. "If you do, I shall go."

And, conscience stricken at her selfishness, she added quickly:

"Yes, get them if you can. I think you ought to get your servants back as soon as you possibly can. They're only following the lead of Cleaver, and most of them will be dying to get back, because there's a whole lot of unemployment in the county. Only—I should like you to let me know before they come."

He helped her to wash up after lunch, and then went upstairs to his study to write some letters, whilst she laid his dinner before she left. The kitchen stairs led into the back hall, and he was more than surprised, when he turned a corner of the stairs, to see a girl standing in the entrance hall. He had left the door wide open, and either he had not heard her ring, or she had not taken the trouble to push the bell. She was very pretty, he saw at a glance, and fashionably dressed, and he wondered if it was a delegation from the women of Sussex demanding his instant withdrawal from the country.

Flashing a smile at him, she came toward him.

"You're Mr. Morlake, I know," she said, as he took her hand. "I've seen your photograph. You don't know me."

"I'm afraid I haven't that advantage," said Jim, and showed her into the drawing-room.

"I simply had to come and see you, Mr. Morlake. This stupid feud of yours with my brother mustn't go on any longer."

"Your brother?" he asked in wonder, and she laughed roguishly.

"Now don't pretend that you don't dislike poor Ralph very intensely."

A light was beginning to show.

"Then you are Miss Hamon?" he said.

"Of course I'm Miss Hamon! I came over from Paris specially to see you. Ralph is terribly worried about this *frightful* quarrel you're carrying on."

"I suppose he is," said Jim subtly. "And you have come all the way from Paris to patch up our feud, have you? Of course you're Lydia Hamon. How stupid of me! I remember you years and years ago, before the days of your brother's prosperity."

Lydia Hamon had not the slightest desire to be remembered years and years ago, and she turned him off that dangerous topic.

"Now tell me, Morlake, isn't it possible for you and Ralph to get together, as you delightful Americans say, and——"

The door opened abruptly, and Jane Smith came in. She was dressed for going home and was pulling on her gloves.

"I thought you were in your study," she began and then her eyes fell upon the visitor.

If the apparition of Lydia Hamon startled her, the effect on Lydia was staggering. She raised a pair of unnecessary lorgnettes and surveyed the girl with a look of horror.

"Surely I'm not mistaken?" she said. "It is Lady Joan Carston!"

"Damn!" said Joan.

CHAPTER XXIV

Jim Learns Things

LADY JOAN CARSTON! Jim could not believe his ears.

"Surely you are mistaken, Miss Hamon?" he said. "This lady is Miss——" He stopped.

"This lady is Lady Joan Carston, and I am delighted to see that you are such good friends. I'm sure my brother's fiancée will be only too happy to help me in my little scheme to make you and Ralph better friends."

"Who is your brother's fiancée?" asked Joan, electrified by this cool claim.

"It is generally understood that you are," smiled Lydia sweetly.

"It may be understood in lunatic asylums, where many people are even under the impression that they are related to Napoleon Bonaparte," said Joan sharply, "but it is certainly not understood either by me or by my father. And we should be the first to know."

Lydia shrugged her shoulders. She was trying to find an explanation of the girl's presence in this house and from her viewpoint only one explanation was possible. And then it began to dawn on her that the house was empty, save for these two people, and her attitude, her manner and her voice became instantly stiffened by the shock.

"I suppose your father is here, Lady Joan?" she asked primly.

"My father is not at Creith," replied the girl, who saw what she was driving at. "Nor is my aunt, nor any of my cousins. In fact, I have no other chaperone at Wold except the kitchen stove and a sense of my immense superiority."

The eyebrows of the red-haired girl went up to points.

"I don't think Ralph would like this——" she began.

"There are so many things that Ralph doesn't like"—it was Jim who stepped into the breach and saved Joan Carston from

the humiliation of apologising for the things she undoubtedly would have said—"but I shouldn't bother to catalogue them. I don't think, Miss Hamon, that we need trouble Lady Joan with the old family feud."

He turned to the girl and held out his hand.

"I am extremely grateful to you," he said. "That is a very banal thing to say, but it expresses completely just how I feel."

He expected to find her embarrassed, but she was coolness itself, and he marvelled at her self-possession.

"I think you had better go in search of your housemaids," she said with a twinkle in her eyes, "and arrange for them to come to you to-morrow afternoon at two o'clock."

She emphasised the words, and a weight rolled from his heart, for he knew that Joan Carston would be there to breakfast.

Lydia watched the girl as she walked down the drive.

"Then it is true that Lady Joan is engaged to you?" she asked, and Jim's jaw dropped. "She told me so, but I thought she was being—well, annoying."

"Engaged to me?" he gasped. "Did—did she say so?"

Lydia smiled contemptuously.

"Of course, it wasn't true, though it might have been, judging by her indiscretion. She is a friend of yours?"

"A great friend," said Jim vaguely, "but only in the sense that Lady Bountiful is a friend of the bedridden villager."

"You, of course, being the bedridden villager?"

She forced a smile, but he saw in her face something of the emotion she was endeavouring to suppress, as the object of her visit came back to her.

"Seriously, Mr. Morlake," she drawled, "don't you think it is time that your stupid quarrel with Ralph came to an end?"

"Do I understand that you are an ambassador bearing olive branches?" he asked, a little amused. "Because, if you are, I suppose, like all ambassadors, you have something to offer me besides an intangible friendship, and that of a very doubtful quality."

She walked across to the door and closed it, and then, coming nearer, said in a low voice:

"Ralph said that you wanted something that he had—he no longer has it!"

Jim frowned down at her.

"Has he destroyed it?"

"He no longer has it," repeated the girl. "It is in other hands."

He stared at her incredulously.

"Do you seriously mean that?"

She nodded.

"Then how does it come about that your brother is at large?" he asked, and she flamed up at that.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Morlake. 'At large?' Do you mean that my brother should be in prison?"

"He should be in prison, anyway," said Jim calmly. "But if the document—and I take it you are referring to a certain document—has fallen into other hands, then most certainly, unless the finder is a thief and a blackmailer, your brother should be waiting his trial."

It was very evident to him that she had been speaking in the dark, and that she had no idea of the nature of the missing paper.

"What does he want me to do?" he went on.

"He particularly wants your friendship," she said. "He asked me to tell you that there is no difference between you which cannot be smoothed over."

"In other words, if the gentleman who has the statement in his hands brings it to light, your brother wishes me to testify in his favour?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know whether that is what he wishes—perhaps it is. He did not tell me any more than I have told you, that the something which you wanted had passed out of his hands, and he asked for your friendship."

Jim walked to the window and looked out, trying to solve the riddle she had set him; and all the time there ran through the web of his thoughts the more amazing discovery that Jane Smith was Joan Carston, the daughter of the Earl of Creith, and, from his standpoint, an unapproachable person.

That was the first of the many surprises that awaited James Morlake.

"I don't see what I can do," he said, turning back to Lydia. "The feud, as you prefer to call it, between your brother and myself is dependent upon his making reparation. You may tell him that."

"Then it is to be war?" she said, a little dramatically.

He smiled, and was serious again instantly.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is to be war."

She bit her lip, thinking quickly. Her instructions had been more or less vague, and Ralph Hamon had left to her the actual method by which she would carry his suggestions into effect. There was an alternative attitude for her to take, and she decided that the moment had come to initiate the new rôle.

"Do you know what this means to me, his only sister?" she asked with a little catch in her voice. "Do you realise what it means to lie awake night after night, thinking, worrying, terrified of what the morning will bring forth?"

"I'm sorry that I don't. Honestly, Miss Hamon, I am not sympathetic. If it is true that you feel these misgivings and emotions—well, that is unfortunate."

He walked up and stood squarely before her.

"You may take this message to your brother, Lydia Hamon —that I am in this to the very end. I have risked consequences more fearful than any you can picture, and I go on until my mission is completed."

"A burglar with a mission!" she sneered.

"Rather amusing, isn't it?" he said good-humouredly.

If he had any doubts as to her sincerity, those doubts were now dispelled. The woman was an actress and a bad one; she could not sustain the pose of distress at the continuance of the "feud," or hide the chagrin of her failure.

"You've had your chance, Morlake," she said, the venom in her coming out. "I don't know what this trouble is between you and Ralph, but he's too clever for you, and sooner or later you'll admit it. I'm sick of the whole business! If Ralph's a crook, what are you? Aren't there enough pickings in the world for both of you?"

"Spoken like a little lady," said Jim Morlake, as he showed her to the door.

CHAPTER XXV

The Cablegram

In a week a remarkable change had come over Ralph Hamon. There were times when he appeared to his sister to be a little old man. He was greyer, new lines had appeared in his forbidding face, and he seemed to stoop more. Lydia, wise in her generation, did not attempt to probe too deeply into the cause. To her surprise, when she had reported the result of her interview with Morlake, he had not, to use her own expression, gone up in the air, but had accepted her account of the talk with the greatest calmness. Even her little titbit about Joan Carston's presence at Wold House had not aroused him.

She went to his office that day after her interview with Jim, her baggage at the station, her railway ticket and reservation in her handbag.

"I'm going back to Paris this afternoon," she said airily, "and I want a little money."

He looked up at her.

"Who told you you were going back to Paris?" he asked, and her simulated surprise did not impress him. "You're staying in London until I ask you to go. I told you that a week ago. It may be necessary for us to move, and move pretty quick."

"What is wrong?" she asked, realising for the first time the immense seriousness of the position. "Are things very bad?" she asked.

"As bad as they can be," said Hamon, and added: "for the moment. You see, Lydia," he went on in a kindlier tone, "I don't want to be left quite alone at this moment. You're part of

the baggage. And besides"—he hesitated—"I promised Sadi that I would take you out to Tangier."

She did not speak until she had pulled a chair up to the table and sat down opposite him, her elbows on the desk, her eyes fixed on his.

"Have you promised Sadi anything more?" she asked.

He avoided her gaze.

"Five or six years ago you were very keen on my living at Tangier," she said. "Why? What have you promised Sadi?"

"Nothing, directly. You used to like him, Lydia."

She made a little face.

"He interested me, naturally. Any young girl would be interested in a picturesque Moor—and, from what you tell me, he isn't even picturesque any longer. Besides, I've got my values in order."

"Sadi is very useful to me—extremely useful. He belongs to one of the first Moorish families, he is a Christian—at least, he's supposed to be—and he's rich."

She smiled contemptuously.

"So rich that he draws a quarterly allowance from you! No, Ralph, you can't bluff me. I know all about Sadi, as much as I want to know. He's just a tricky Moor; and if you expect me to play Desdemona to him, you've got another guess coming. Othello was never a favourite play of mine. He is very amusing, I daresay, and he is quite a big person in Tangier, and he may be a Christian, though I doubt it. But I'm not going to be Number Twenty-three in his establishment, and the Lord didn't intend me to end my days in an unventilated harem, even though I become the pearl of great price and the principal wife of the Shereef Sadi Hafiz. I've been reading a few books on the subject lately," she went on, "and I understand that there's a whole lot of romance in the desert, but, to anybody who's sniffed the Near East, there's not enough romance to compensate for one bad smell. The last weeks I was in Paris I had several letters from you, Ralph, talking about the languorous joys of Morocco, and I've had it in my mind to ask you just what you were thinking about."

"Sadi is very fond of you," he said awkwardly. "And these

marriages often turn out well. He is a man well thought of by the Government, and he has more decorations than a general."

"If he was as well decorated as a Christmas tree, he wouldn't appeal to me," said she decisively, "so let us consider that matter settled finally."

She was secretly astonished that he accepted her very plain talk without protest.

"Have it your own way," he said, "but you'll have to stay in London, Lydia, until I'm through with this other business."

After she had gone, he made an effort to work, but without success. From time to time he glanced at the clock on his desk, as though he were expecting some visitor. A cable from Tangier had come that morning, and once or twice he took it from his pocket-book and read it over gravely. Sadi's impecuniosity was no new experience, but this last demand was interesting in view of possible contingencies.

A small and frugal lunch was served in his office, and after it was cleared away he rang for his clerk, and taking his cheque-book from the safe, wrote reluctantly.

"Take this to the bank and bring the money back in fives."

The well-trained clerk did not whistle when he saw the figures, for he was used to dealing with large sums, but seldom had Mr. Hamon drawn actual cash to that amount.

He returned in half-an-hour with three stout packages, which Hamon did not even trouble to count.

"I am expecting Mr. Marborne," he said, as he put the money away in a drawer. "Show him right in."

Marborne was due at half-past two. It was nearer three when he swaggered into the office, a marvellously transformed man, for he was dressed in what he conceived to be the height of fashion, and added to the outrage of a crimson tie a grey top-hat. He took the big cigar from his teeth and nodded jovially at the watchful man behind the desk.

"'Morning, Hamon! Sorry I'm a bit late, but I had one or two calls to make."

He had been drinking: Hamon was quick to notice this. On the whole, he preferred to deal with people who drank. One of his stock arguments against prohibition was that it put the

habitually sober at a disadvantage with the occasionally drunk.

"Got the money, old man?"

Without a word, Hamon opened the drawer and threw the notes on to the table.

"Thanks," said Marborne, who invariably developed gentility in his cups. "How does it feel, having a family retainer, eh?"

Hamon leant his elbows on the table and glared across at the blackmailer.

"See here, Marborne, I'm willing to finance you up to the limit, but you've got to keep your promise."

"I don't remember having made any," said the other coolly. "I told you that your little secret was safe with me. You aren't going to kick about expenses again, are you?" he asked humorously. "I've got a position to keep up. Thanks to working for you, I've been kicked out of the police force without my pension, and so has Slone. You would have left us to starve if I hadn't had a bit of luck and a naturally prying disposition."

"Where have you left that—that paper? Suppose it falls into somebody else's hands?" asked Hamon, and Marborne laughed.

"Do you think I'm such a fool that I'd throw away a good living?" he asked contemptuously.

Unconsciously he pressed his hand to his left side. It was an involuntary movement, but it did not escape the attention of Hamon.

"It is in a safe," said Marborne loudly, "burglar-proof and fire-proof, and I am the only person that's got the key. See?"

"I see," said Hamon, and was almost cheerful when he opened the door to facilitate his visitor's departure.

He came back to his desk, and without hesitation took a cable form and addressed a message to "Colport, Hotel Cecil, Tangier." There was only one possible solution to the tyranny of Marborne. He must go the way of the unknown sailor whom a cyclist had found dying on the Portsmouth Road.

CHAPTER XXVI

Joan Called Jane

NOT since that night of storm had Joan seen the lodger at Mrs. Cornford's cottage. She had purposely avoided her visitor, and with that extraordinary determination which was part of her character, had ruled out her vision and knowledge as a bad dream, something hideous born of the storm.

Once in the middle of the night she woke up to the stark reality of fact. In the morning Jim had seen traces of the despair that had entered her heart, and had wondered, and, wondering, had been troubled.

On the morning that was to see her final visit to Wold House, her maid came into her room as she was dressing.

"Mrs. Cornford wishes to see you," she said, and Joan paled.

"You're a great coward," she said aloud.

"Me, my lady?" asked the astonished girl.

"No, me, Alice. I'll be down in a few minutes."

There are certain disadvantages about putting things out of your mind. The reactions are apt to be a little drastic, and Joan was inwardly quaking when she came into the presence of her guest.

"I heard that you were back, and I came to ask whether Lord Creith would grant me a lease of the cottage, Lady Joan."

"Is that all?" said Joan, immeasurably relieved. "Of course he will, Mrs. Cornford. Are you settling in Creith?"

Mrs. Cornford hesitated.

"I think so," she said. "Mr. Farringdon is doing so well that he wants me to stay. He has made me a very handsome offer, and I can afford to give up my music teaching."

"Mr. Farringdon?" Joan's voice trembled a little. "He is your lodger, isn't he? The young man who—who drinks. Where did he come from?"

"I don't know. He was on the West Coast of Africa for some time. He got into some scrape in England, and his people sent

him abroad when he was very young—he was expelled from his school for an escapade."

"Did he tell you what it was?"

She waited, holding her breath.

"No—he just said that he did something pretty bad. He took to drink on the Coast, and drifted back to England. His father died and left him an annuity. Would you like to meet him?"

"No!"

The refusal was so abrupt and so emphatic that Joan saw she had hurt the woman.

"No, my dear—I don't want to meet him—my nerves are a little on edge with recent happenings in this neighbourhood."

"You mean Mr. Morlake. How very terrible that was! His servants have left him, they tell me. I almost volunteered to look after him. Mr. Farringdon saw him on the night of his arrival."

"I know he did," said the girl, and corrected herself hastily. "I'm told he did."

Mrs. Cornford left her a little thoughtful. She must go back to London and stay there, even though she left the American burglar to subsist on raw eggs!

. . . . .

There were two strange men in the village. Joan saw them long before the gossips of Creith told her that they were young business men spending a holiday in the country. She saw them as they rode into the village on the previous afternoon, two healthy-looking men who seemed to find time hanging on their hands.

When she came to Wold House to cook the breakfast (it was half-past nine when she appeared) she mentioned her discovery.

Jim Morlake nodded.

"Yes—Sergeant Finnigan and Detective Spooner from headquarters. I saw them arrive the night after I returned. They came by the last train and were driven over from the station in a car belonging to the local police."

He saw the concern in her face and laughed.

"You didn't imagine that the police would drop me as an unprofitable subject, did you? Welling sent them to make a study of my habits. They will be here for at least another week—I thought of asking them up to dinner one night. I guess the food they get at the Red Lion doesn't wholly satisfy them."

She made no reply, turning instantly to another matter.

"I shall not come again. I think you can gather your domestic staff. I saw Cleaver in the village yesterday and he was almost tearful at the thought of losing a good job."

"He's lost it," said Jim grimly. "He's fixed—permanently! He is the one man I'll never have."

"When he asks to return, you must take him back," she said. "Don't be feeble! Of course he must come back."

"Must he?—Well, if you say——"

"It isn't what I say. Don't shield your weaknesses behind me. You'll take him back because you can't quarrel with servants any more than you can quarrel with poor Mr. Colter."

She heard him chuckle, and frowned.

"Forgive my unseemly mirth, Lady Joan," he said penitently, "but I haven't been bullied for—oh, a long time! I'll take Cleaver or anybody else. Why did you tell Lydia——"

He stopped, and she paused, fry-pan in hand, to shoot a questioning glance at him.

"Tell her—what?"

"Oh, nothing . . . I suppose you said it to annoy her. She thinks so anyhow."

He found himself confused; he could feel the colour going to his face, and the more he tried to control this ridiculous display the more incoherent of speech and *gauche* of manner he became.

"You mean that I told her I was engaged to you?" she said calmly. "Yes, I did. I wanted to shock her, and yours was the first name that occurred to me—you don't mind?"

"Mind . . . ? Well, I should say not . . . !"

"I hoped you wouldn't. When I remembered, after I had left you, that I had confided my awful secret to Lydia Hamon, I had ten million fits."

Skilfully she lifted the eggs from the pan and laid them on the dish.

"I was afraid that I had hopelessly compromised you—you're married, of course?"

"I am *not* married," he said violently, "and have never been married."

"Most nice people are," she said with such indifference that his heart sank; "and I suppose you *are* nice . . . yes, I'm sure you are. Don't put your elbow on the egg—thank you!"

He had no mind for eggs. He hated eggs: the sight of a yolk made him shudder.

"I am sorry you are Lady Joan. I liked Jane . . . I like Joan too, immensely. There was a girl in Springfield, Connecticut, that I knew——"

"Is it necessary to tell me about your early love affairs?" she asked. "I am too young to be interested."

"This was not a love affair," he protested hotly. "Her name was Joan, and she called me Jim. Her father was an Alderman."

"My name is Joan, and if you wish to call me Joan don't let anything stand in your way," she said, seating herself at the kitchen table. "I may even call you Jim, but father has a pet Persian cat he calls Jim, and if I called you that I'd expect you to *mew!* I don't like Lexington—it is too much like the name of a railway station. And I don't like Morlake. I had better call you nothing. . . . About this engagement of ours. I wonder if you would mind if I did not break it off for a week or so? Mr. Hamon has views about me and my future."

"But suppose he carries this ridiculous story to your father?" he asked, aghast.

" 'Ridiculous story' would have come better from me," she said coldly, "but as you got in first, it is due to my father to say that he would be amused. I was worried at first for fear the story got into the newspapers."

"Why has Hamon such a pull in this part of the country?" he asked.

She told him very frankly just how Mr. Hamon's local interests had developed, and he whistled.

"So you see, our title is rather a hollow mockery. The real Lord of Creith is Hamon, and I am his handmaiden. He wants to marry me, just as all bad men in stories want to marry the daughter of the ruined earl. To make the story complete, I should be madly in love with the poor but honest farmer who is the real heir to the estate. But all the farmers round here are rich, and daddy says that there isn't one he'd trust with a waggon load of wurzels."

He could not keep his eyes from her as he listened, fascinated. It was not her beauty that held him, nor her breathtaking self-possession, nor the humour behind irony. A little of each perhaps, but something else. He remembered the morning—was it yesterday?—that she had come with the unmistakable evidence of tears in her eyes. This hard, practical side of her, this flippancy of comment, was not the real Joan Carston She puzzled him a lot, and frightened him too.

"Don't stare, James—that is better than Jim, but rather on the footman side—it is very rude to stare. I wanted to ask you something too . . . what was it? I know! Last night I borrowed a pair of night glasses from Peters. From my window I can see Wold House. At night there is a yellow blob of light which I couldn't identify. With the glasses I saw that it was the library window. And I saw your shadow passing and repassing across the white blind. Why do you have white shades, James? You need not answer that. You were still walking up and down when I went to bed at one o'clock. I watched you for an hour . . . why are you laughing?"

"Finnigan and Spooner watched for longer," he said between paroxysms. "They made a special report on my restlessness. I guess that."

"How do you know—that they were watching, I mean?"

"After it was dark I laid down 'trip wires,' only I used black thread," he said. "Every thread was broken this morning. So was the cotton I pegged across the gate, which I left unlocked. On the path under the window I laid down sheets of brown paper covered with bird lime—I found them on the road this morning."

Her eyes danced with joy

"The boy who cleans the boots at the Red Lion is a friend of mine. I went down early this morning and found him scraping the sticky stuff off Finnigan's boots, and Spooner's pants were horrible to see—he must have sat down in it! They will watch me, of course—they would be fools if they didn't."

When the meal was over and they were washing the dishes together, she asked:

"What were you thinking about last night that you couldn't sleep?"

"My sins," he answered solemnly, and for some reason or other her attitude was a little frigid toward him for the remainder of the morning.

And to whatever error he had committed in the morning, he added what proved to be a crowning indiscretion. He came into the kitchen and found her at the table, bare-armed, kneading some pastry.

"That was a bad burn," he said.

He had never before seen the heart-shaped scar on the back of her hand.

To his surprise, she flushed red.

"It only shows sometimes," she said shortly.

She left soon after without saying good-bye.

In the afternoon came a humble Cleaver, with a rambling and unconvincing story of the causes that led to his resignation. Jim Morlake cut him short.

"You may come back," he said, "and you may reëngage any servants who wish to return. But there is a new routine in this household. Everybody must be in bed by ten, and under no circumstances may you or anybody else interrupt me when I am working in my room."

"If Mr. Hamon hadn't, so to speak, lured me away——" began Cleaver.

"I have known Mr. Hamon in many rôles," interrupted Jim, "but I confess that Hamon the siren is a new one on me."

The study was situated at that end of the building nearest Creith House. It was a long, rather narrow room, with two entrances, one leading to the hall, the other opening into a small lobby. Here was a narrow staircase leading directly into his

bedroom, which was above the study. The bedroom, in a sense, ran at right angles to the room below, for whilst this ran lengthwise along the front of the house, the bedroom extended from the front to the back.

Whilst Cleaver was collecting his scattered staff, Jim went up the staircase to the bedroom, locked the door, and, taking up a corner of the carpet, opened a small trapdoor in the floor and took out a black tin box, which he carried to the table. From this he extracted his little leather hold-all of tools, a gun and the inevitable square of silk, and these he took down to the study, putting them into his drawer. Though all the detectives in the world were watching him, though the threat of life imprisonment hung over him like a cloud, The Black must again go about his furtive work. For the voice of the dead was whispering again, urgently, insistently, and Jim Morlake did not hesitate to obey.

CHAPTER XXVII

Mrs. Cornford's Lodger

Jim filled up the tank of his car, stacked a couple of tins in the dickey and drove the machine into the village, stopping first at the post office to send a wire to Binger, and then at the blacksmith's shop, which, since the demise of the garage, had served the rough needs of motorists. The complicated repairs which he described to the blacksmith could not be carried out at Creith, as he well knew.

"You had better take the car to Horsham, Mr. Morlake," said the blacksmith. "I don't know enough about these here machines to do the work you want."

The police watcher saw him drive off and strolled across to the blacksmith to discover what was the trouble.

"His steering apparatus has gone wrong," said the smith. "He has patched it up himself, but I told him it is dangerous to drive and he's taken it over to Bolley's at Horsham."

Satisfied, Detective Spooner went back to his chief and reported. Just as it was getting dark, Jim returned by the little motor omnibus which plied three times a day between Creith and Horsham. This also Spooner reported.

"I don't see what's the use of keeping us down here at all," said Sergeant Milligan. "It's a dead and alive hole, and it's not likely that Morlake is going to start anything just yet. The trial's shaken him up a bit."

"I wish he'd get in the habit of going to bed early," grumbled his subordinate. "I had a talk with the butler—who is going back to him, by the way—and he said that he'd never known his boss to have insomnia before."

"Perhaps it is his conscience," said Milligan hopefully.

Soon after Jim returned to the house, Binger arrived with a small handbag, containing all that was necessary for him in the matter of changes, and William Cleaver showed him into Jim's room.

"I've got a job for you that you'll like, Binger," said Jim. "It is to sit in a chair and do nothing for five or six hours every night. You will be able to sleep in the day and I've not the slightest doubt that you'll also put in a few short winks whilst on duty."

Binger, whose face had fallen at the suggestion of work, brightened up again.

"I'm not naturally a lazy man, sir," he said, "but I find at my time of life, after my military experience, that things tire me very hastily. I think it must be the fever I got in Hindia. It isn't that I'm lazy—ho no! Work I love. Are you having a hard time 'ere, sir?—I expect you hare! Naturally the gentry would be a bit put out, you being a burglar, sir. I'm sure the way the reporters came hafter me when you was in jug was disgraceful. They put my portrait in the papers, sir—maybe you saw it?" He fumbled in his pocket and took out a large, creased and somewhat idealised photograph of Mr. Binger. "Not that I court publicity, sir, to use a foreign hexpression, but if you're

in the public heye, you're in the public heye, and there's no getting away from it. This Mommet" (he referred to Mahmet thus) "he doesn't mind at all. Being a Hafrican, he 'asn't got any sense. You've given it hup, I suppose, sir?"

"Given what hup?" asked Jim.

"Burglarising, sir."

He saw an unfamiliar object standing on a side table.

"Going in for music, sir?" he asked.

Jim looked across at the big gramophone that had been delivered to him a few days before.

"Yes, I've developed a pretty taste in jazz," he said. "Now listen to my instructions, Binger, and they are to be carried out to the letter. To-night at ten o'clock you will take up your post outside my door. You can have the most comfortable chair you can find, and I don't mind very much if you sleep. But nobody is to come into this room—you understand? And under no circumstances am I to be interrupted. If any detectives call——"

"Detectives?" said the startled Binger.

"There are two in Creith," said Jim coolly, "but I don't think they will worry you. But if they call, knock at the front door, or do anything after ten o'clock, they are not to be admitted unless they can produce a warrant signed by a magistrate, which is extremely unlikely. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to bring you in some coffee?"

"I want you to bring me in nothing," said Jim sharply. "If you attempt to come in or interrupt me, you'll be fired."

He had the best dinner he had had in weeks that night, for the majority of the staff were again on duty. At half-past nine he interviewed Cleaver, who was already making preparations to retire for the night.

Jim strolled into the grounds and walked to the gate. The road was deserted, but in the shadow of a hedge he saw a red spark of light that glowed and died with regularity. It was the cigar of the watcher, and he smiled to himself.

Going back to his study, he found that Binger, with a rug and a chair, had taken up his position in the hall.

"Good-night, Binger," he said and locked the door.

Though the house was equipped for electric lighting, the petrol engine which supplied the current had not been working since his return. On his study table was a shaded vapour lamp, which threw a powerful light on to the desk. The shade he had removed and the brilliance of the flame was almost blinding.

He picked up the gramophone and put it on the table in the middle of the room, wound it tight and regulated the turn-table until it moved at its slowest pace. Then, from his desk, he took a long steel rod, which he screwed into the end of the turn-table. To this he had fixed a tiny cardboard figure, the silhouette of a man with his hands behind him, clamped to a piece of stout wire. This he fastened to the end of the rod, and carrying the vapour lamp from his desk, placed it in the centre of the turn-table and released the catch. The disc turned slowly and with it the lamp and the cardboard figure. Presently the blurred shadow of the silhouette passed across the white window shade.

"There he goes again!" groaned Detective Spooner, as he saw the shadow pass. "How long is he going to keep that up?"

Apparently not for long, for Jim stopped the machine, and, passing upstairs to his room, changed into an old black suit. Over this he drew a tightly fitting ulster that reached almost to his heels, and this, with a soft black hat, completed his wardrobe. He put his tools and gun in his pocket, added a small but powerful electric torch and looked at his watch. It was half-past ten. The house was silent. He went back to the study and, going close to the door, called Binger.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Remember I am not to be interrupted."

"No, sir, I quite understand."

From the voice he gathered that the watchful Binger was already half asleep.

He set the gramophone working again, watched it for a little while, regulating the speed, and then, passing up to his bedroom, crossed to the window at the back of the house, and, lifting the sash, stepped out upon a small balcony.

In a minute he was in the grounds, making his way furtively in the shadow of the bushes to the little footbridge that led to the Creith estate. Ten minutes' walk and he came to an isolated barn, approached by a cart track across a field which was his property, and here the car was waiting. . . .

"He's at it again," said Spooner to his sergeant who had strolled up to join the watcher. "There he goes," as a shadow crossed the window jerkily.

Spooner groaned.

"This means an all-night job," he said.

At that moment Jim's car was running up the Haymarket in a drizzle of rain. He turned into Wardour Street and, putting the machine at the tail of a long queue of cars that were waiting here to pick up the theatre traffic, he walked into Shaftesbury Avenue and hailed a taxi. As the car drew up, the door of a saloon bar was pushed open violently and a man stumbled out.

He fell against Jim, who caught and jerked him to his feet.

" 'Scuse me!" said the drunkard, "had a slight argument . . . on purely abstrac' question of metaphysics," he got the word out with difficulty.

Jim looked at him closely. It was the young man who had come to his house on the night of the storm.

"Hello, my friend, you're a long way from home," he said, before he remembered that he particularly did not wish to be recognised. But the man was incapable of recognition.

The taxicab was waiting, and, seeing the little crowd that was gathering, he pushed the sot into the car.

"Drive to Long Acre," he said.

At this hour of the night the street of wholesale fruit salesmen and motor-car depôts would be empty. Stopping the cab in the quietest part of the street, he guided his companion to the side-walk.

"Now, Mr. Soak, I advise you to go home."

"Home!" said the other bitterly. "Got no home! Got no friends, got no girl!"

"Perhaps that is not unfortunate—for the girl," said Jim, impatient to be gone.

"Is it? I dunno. I'd like to get hold of the girl who played the trick on me. I'd kill her—I would, I'd kill her!"

His weak face was distorted with sudden rage and then he burst into drunken tears.

"She ruined my life, damn her!" he sobbed, "and I don't know her, except her Christian name, don't know anything except that her father's a lord . . . she's got a little heart-shaped scar on the back of her hand."

"What is the name of this girl who—who ruined your life?" asked Jim huskily.

The young man wiped his eyes and gulped.

"Joan—that is her name, Joan . . . she played it low down on me and if I ever find her, I'll kill her!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Mr. Welling Gives Advice

On the day that Ralph Hamon received an answer to his Moorish cablegram, Mr. Marborne dined well and expensively, for he had reached that blissful stage of conscious prosperity when money came natural.

His guest that night was Mr. Augustus Slone; and Sergeant Slone, from being an uninteresting, snub-nosed man with a vacuous face and an apologetic air, had developed into a man of fashion.

So they dined in the largest restaurant in Oxford Street, and it was a dinner of many courses.

"Another bottle," said Mr. Marborne grandly.

He pushed down the stiff front of his shirt, which bulged above the white waistcoat, and examined his cigar with a critical air.

"Well, Slone, this is more my idea of life than rousting round looking for little tea-leaves."*

"You've said it," said Slone simply.

He also was dressed in expensive raiments and if his black dress bow had an edging of purple, it was only because a certain gentlemen's outfitter had assured him that this was the latest and most recherche vagary of fashion.

"How long is it going on?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and regarding his companion with a glassy stare.

"For ever," said the other, and as he waved his hand the overhead lights were reflected brilliantly from the diamond in his new ring.

"What have you got on Hamon?"

"What do you mean—what have I got on him?"

"You've got something." Slone nodded with drunken wisdom. "You've put som'n on to him somehow. What have you found out about him?"

"Never mind what I've found out. All you've got to do is to be satisfied and ask no questions. Am I doing the right thing by you or am I not?"

"You're certainly doing the right thing by me," admitted Slone with warmth and they shook hands fervently across the table.

"I'll tell you—not everything, but a little. A certain document has come into my possession," said Marborne. "I won't say what it is or how I got it, but it is something which would do him a lot of no good. That fellow is worth a million, Slone, and he has a sister. . . . !" He kissed the tips of his fingers and waved them to the ceiling ecstatically.

"I know all about his sister," said Slone, "and she's not the sort of girl who would have anything to do with you, Marborne."

Marborne's face went a dull red. In his cups he was somewhat quarrelsome.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "What was she before Hamon made his money? A barmaid! That's what she was.

**In the argot of the London crook, a tea-leaf is a thief.*

She served the drinks in a little dive off Glasshouse Street. She's no better than me—in fact, she is not so good."

Slone assented sycophantically.

"And there's no sense in talking about putting the black on Hamon," Marborne went on. "What is he—a thief, that's what he is and I can prove it."

"Is that what you know about him, Marborne?"

"Never mind what I know," retorted Marborne, beckoning the waiter as a resolve came to him.

"Let us have another drink," suggested Slone.

"You've had enough," said the other. "There's that old swine, Welling!"

The shock of the discovery that he had been under the observation of that grey-haired sleuth probably all the evening, sobered him. As he caught Marborne's eye Welling rose from the little table where he had been enjoying a protracted dinner and walked across to the two and instinctively Slone stood to attention.

"Sit down, you fool," said Marborne under his breath. "You're not in the police force now. Good evening, Captain Welling."

"Good evening, Marborne. Having a good time?" He sat down at the unoccupied end of the table and his mild eyes surveyed the former police officer with interest. "Doing well, eh? Making a lot of money? That's the thing to do, Marborne. Honest money brings happiness, crook money brings time."

"I'm not going to discuss with you, Captain Welling, whether my money's honest or dishonest. If you think——"

Welling stopped him with an almost humble gesture.

"You can't mean to suggest that you aren't making a fortune?" he said. "How is friend Hamon?"

"I don't know Mr. Hamon—at least not very well," protested Marborne loudly. "What are these innuendoes, Captain? I don't know why you should intrude yourself upon me. I've got nothing to thank you for."

"You've a lot to thank me for," said Welling, lighting the ragged stub of a cigar which he extracted with care from his waistcoat pocket. "The Commissioner wanted to prosecute you,

and I think you would have had nine months' hard labour as the result of certain indiscretions of yours, but I persuaded him, in the interests of the service, that it would be better if we let bygones be bygones. Hamon is well, you say?"

"I didn't say anything about Hamon."

"A nice man," mused Julius softly, "an extremely nice man. You're working for him?"

"I tell you, I've nothing to do with Mr. Hamon."

"You must be working for him," said the other with gentle insistence. "He drew a thousand pounds from the bank only a week ago and at least three of the notes have been passed by you. He would hardly pay you for nothing, would he, Marborne, because that is not the way of the world." He sighed heavily. "Our cruel employers get the last ounce out of us, and perhaps they're right. What are you now—a financier?"

Marborne was silent.

"I've been worrying about Hamon," Welling went on. "I saw him for a few minutes the other day and he looked ill. As if he had some trouble on his mind. He couldn't have lost anything from Grosvenor Place, or he would have reported the matter to the police, wouldn't he? Of course he would! Yes, I'm glad to see you're getting on, Marborne. And Slone too! They tell me he's living in a Bloomsbury hotel like a gentleman! You boys are making money." He shook a finger waggishly at the infuriated and a little frightened Marborne. "You're simply dragging it in, Inspector——It sounds better to call you Inspector, doesn't it? Somebody was telling me, you've had a safe put up in your apartments—a beautiful new, green, warranted-to-defy-fire-and-thieves safe."

"You've been tailing me up, Welling," said Marborne roughly. "You've no right to do that."

"Tailing you up?" Julius Welling seemed shocked at the charge. "That is the last thing in the world I should think of doing. But gossip gets around—you know how small London is. One man sees one thing, one man sees another, and they sort of pass on the information. And I think you are wise. If you've got a lot of loose money lying around, and you don't

patronise banks, it is only an intelligent precaution to have a good safe."

"What do you mean by not using banks?" said Marborne hotly. "I've got a banking account in Holborn."

"But you never use it," said the gentle Julius, shaking his head, "and again I'm sure you are right. You never know when a bank will fail. On the other hand, if you've got a nice, big, green, fire proof safe, there's nothing to fear except burglars. And what are burglars? The Black wouldn't rob you, even if he hadn't gone out of the burglarly business for good —which of course he has."

He looked round quickly and then lowering his voice, he said:

"Marborne, have you ever tried to tie a tin can to the tail of a wildcat? I see by your expression that you haven't. It is less dangerous than 'tinning' Ralph Hamon. The Old Book says there's a time to make merry and a time to be sad, a time to sleep and a time to eat; and let me tell you that there is a time to quit, too! And that's very near at hand. I wish you no harm, Marborne. You're a bit of a bad lad, but there's a lot about you that I like. Your simplicity is one of the things and your transparent honesty is another. And I shouldn't feel right if I didn't pass on these few words of wisdom and guidance. Pack up your bundle and go while the going's good."

"Go where?" asked the puzzled Marborne.

Welling rose heavily from the table.

"They tell me Spain is a pretty useful place. But keep to the north. The south is too near to Morocco. Italy is another country where living is cheap and the climate is passable. I'll do what I can to protect you."

"Protect me!" gasped Marborne, and Welling nodded.

"Yes, sir, that is the word I used. I tell you I'll do my best for you, but I'm not superhuman. Keep away from wildcats."

To Marborne's intense irritation, the old man patted him on the shoulder.

"Remember that easy money stings. You don't feel the sting for a long time after, but when you do, it'll hurt like hell!"

CHAPTER XXIX

A Love Call

"He is a dithering old fool," said Marborne angrily, "and I can't stand here all night discussing Welling. Get me a taxi, commissionaire."

"Don't you make any mistake about Welling," said Slone, a greatly troubled man. "That man knows! If he says 'quit' you take my advice and quit."

"I don't even want your advice. I'll see you in the morning," said Marborne, bustling into the taxi.

He was more sober than he had been since the dinner started and his first impulse was to go home. Indeed, he gave instructions to this effect, but changed them and leaning from the window ordered the driver to take him to Grosvenor Place.

There was a light in the drawing-room and he smiled as he mounted the steps.

Lydia heard his voice in the hall and almost before the footman had announced his name—

"I am not at home," she said in a low voice.

This was the third evening visit Marborne had paid in a week and with each he had grown a little bolder. Before the servant could get out of the room, the door was pushed open and the ex-inspector appeared.

"Hullo, Lydia! Thought I would come and see how you were getting along."

It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name and for a second there was a gleam in her eye which boded ill for the adventurous man.

"Ralph is out, I suppose?"

"How long has he been 'Ralph' to you, Mr. Marborne?"

"Oh, for a long time," said Marborne lightly. "I'm not one of these sticklers for etiquette. If a man's name is Ralph, he should be called Ralph."

She checked the retort on her lips, having discovered that

the best method of wearying her visitor was to allow him to make all the conversation, for Marborne had not a great stock of small talk. But to-night she had not the patience to continue in her abstention and presently she was irritated into asking:

"What has happened lately, Mr. Marborne, that you have become so very familiar, both with my brother and myself? I'm not a snob, and I daresay you're as good as anybody else, but I tell you frankly that I do not like your calling me 'Lydia' and I will ask you not to call me so again."

"Why not?" he demanded with a tolerant smile. "Your name *is* Lydia. They used to call you Lydia in the dear old days when you shook cocktails for the thirsty boys!"

She was white with passion but had gained control over her speech.

"Come now, Lydia, what is the use of putting on side? I am a man, the same as other men you meet. Why can't we be good friends? Come and have a bit of luncheon with me to-morrow and we can go on to a matinée afterwards."

"I am thrilled," she said coldly. "Unfortunately I have a luncheon engagement."

"Put it off," said Marborne, his admiring eyes devouring her. "Lydia, why can't we be good friends?"

"Because I don't like you," she said. "After all, barmaids do not choose barmen for their companions; they like to get something a little above them, socially and intellectually. What you are intellectually, I have never had an opportunity of discovering; but I would as soon think of going to luncheon with one of my brother's footmen. Is that plain to you?"

By his purple face and the incoherent sounds that were escaping from his lips she gathered it was plain enough. Fortunately, her brother came in at that moment and gave her an excuse for leaving the room.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Ralph Hamon, glowering at the man.

"What's the matter with me?" spluttered Marborne. "I'll tell you what's the matter with me, Hamon. That sister of yours has got to apologise to me . . . throwing my manners up in my face . . . telling me I'm no better than a footman. . . ."

"I guess she's right," said Hamon, his lips curling at the man's hurt vanity and self-pity. "She didn't call you a blackmailer by any chance, did she? Because, if she did, she'd have been right again. Now see here," his voice was like a rasp. "I'm paying you money because you stole something from me, and you're using the threat of exposure to get it. I'll go on paying money just so long as I have to buy your silence. But you will confine all your business transactions to me. You will have nothing whatever to do with any member of my family, by which I mean my sister. You understand that?"

"I'll do as I dam' well please!" stormed Marborne.

"You're drunk," said Hamon calmly. "If you weren't drunk you wouldn't have made a fool of yourself. See me in the morning."

"I want Lydia to apologise to me," said the other and Hamon laughed sourly.

"Come to-morrow and maybe she will," he said. "I want to go to bed. Have you seen Welling?"

"Welling? Yes. What made you ask that?" asked Marborne in surprise.

"He was standing outside the house as I came in, that is all."

Marborne walked to the window and, drawing aside the blind, peered out. On the opposite side of the road he saw a man standing by the edge of the sidewalk.

"That's Welling," he agreed. "What does he want?"

"He has tailed me up," growled Marborne.

"I'm glad," said the other. "I was afraid for the minute he was tailing me. Have a drink?"

Marborne smiled and shook his head.

"No, thanks—if I'm going to be poisoned I'll have mine at home."

The watcher had disappeared when Marborne left the house. He walked to the corner to get a taxicab and though he looked back several times, he saw no sign of the shadow. He went through the side door of the shop which constituted the entrance to his flat, and waited for some time in the dark passage before he pulled the door open and stepped out. There was still

no sign of Welling. Possibly Hamon had been mistaken, or else Welling's presence had been sheer coincidence.

His apartments occupied the whole of a floor above a shop and had been furnished by the landlord with those solid and useless articles which have been called "furniture" from time immemorial. A buffet that he did not use, a clock that did not go, a table at which it was impossible to write and a three-branch chandelier only one lamp of which was practicable. But on the buffet was a tantalus, and pouring himself out a stiff glass of whisky, he drank it down.

What was Welling driving at, he wondered. And what significance was there in his reference to the safe? It was perfectly true that Marborne kept his money in the flat; and he did this because he had sufficient intelligence to know that there might come a moment when his victim would make it necessary for his hasty departure. And to Marborne money was not real money unless it was visible. A balance at the bank meant nothing except figures that gave him no satisfaction whatsoever.

He stirred the fire into a blaze, took off his dress jacket and went into the bedroom. Switching on the light, he stood in the doorway and the first object on which his eyes rested was the safe. It stood in a corner of the room, supported by a stout wooden stand.

He looked at it dully, uncomprehendingly, and then with a shriek of rage he leapt into the room and began feeling wildly in its dark interior. For the door was hanging and the safe was empty!

When he had recovered from his rage, he made a rapid search of the apartment. The method of entrance was clear. The thief had come up the fire escape, broken through the window of the bedroom and had worked at his leisure.

He dashed downstairs to the street and threw open the door. Captain Welling, his hands clasped behind him, his head perched on one side, was standing on the sidewalk, gazing intently up at the lighted windows of the flat.

"Captain Welling, I want you!"

Marborne's voice betrayed his agitation.

"Anything wrong?" asked Welling as he came over. "Curious my being here."

"I've been robbed—robbed!" said Marborne. "Somebody's broken open my safe. . . ."

He led the way up the stairs, babbling incoherently, and kneeling before the rifled safe, Welling made a brief examination.

"He certainly did the job thoroughly," he said. "But burglar-proof safes are easy to a good cracksman. You'd better not touch it until this morning and we'll have it photographed for finger-prints."

He got out of the window on to the fire escape.

"Hullo! What's this?" he said and took something from the landing at his feet.

"One cotton glove. I suppose we'll find the other at the bottom. I don't think it is necessary to bother about looking for finger-prints."

He examined the glove under the light.

"And you couldn't trace these if you spent a week of Sundays. I'm afraid he's made a good getaway. How much money did you lose?"

"Between two and three thousand pounds, I think," whined Marborne.

"Anything else?"

The ex-inspector looked at him sharply.

"What else was there to lose?" he asked surlily. "Isn't it enough to lose two thousand?"

"Had you any books, any documents of any kind?"

"No, not in the safe," said Marborne and added quickly: "nor anywhere else for the matter of that."

"Looks like The Black's work to me," mused Welling, coming back again to the safe. "It certainly does look like The Black's work. And I don't see how it can be. Have you got a telephone here?"

"In the other room," said Marborne.

Welling put through a long-distance call and went back to make what he knew was doomed to be a fruitless and hopeless search for clues.

The thief had evidently not been satisfied with the money he had found in the safe. Every drawer had been ransacked, its contents thrown to the ground; the cupboard had been wrenched open; a trunk beneath the bed had been forced and its contents strewn about the floor. Even the bed had been dismantled, blanket by blanket, sheet by sheet, and the mattress lay half on the floor and half on the bedstead.

Welling went back to the dining-room. There were no cupboards here and no drawers, save three in the sideboard, which were empty. He looked round the walls. One of the pictures was hanging askew and he nodded.

"He was looking for something, this friend of ours. What was it?" he asked.

"How in hell do I know?" demanded Marborne savagely. "He didn't get it anyway."

"I don't know how you can say that, if you don't know what he was looking for," said Julius gently.

The telephone bell rang. It was the call which Welling had put through to Creith.

"Captain Welling speaking. Is that you, Milligan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is your man?"

"He's in his house—or he was five minutes ago."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely certain. I haven't seen him, but I've seen his shadow. He's here all right. Besides which, he hasn't got a car; it went to Horsham to-day for repair."

"Oh, it did, did it?" said Welling softly. "All right."

He hung up the telephone receiver and went back to Marborne, surveying the wreckage helplessly.

"You'd better 'phone the divisional police and ask them to send a man up, Marborne," said the old chief. "I don't think they'll be able to help you—too bad your losing all that money. Banks are safer."

Marborne said nothing.

CHAPTER XXX

Sadi

IF THE traveller passed up the narrow, hilly street which leads from the Mosque to Great *Sok* of Tangier, and turned abruptly to the right as though the *Kasbah* were his objective, he would have found on his left a high white wall pierced only by a massive gate with bronze-green hinges.

Behind the wall was an untidy garden and a broken stone fountain, sufficiently repaired by an unskilful European workman to allow a feeble jet of water to jerk spasmodically in the air before it fell into a black basin, where, amidst the rubbish of years, swam languid gold-fish.

The house of Sadi Hafiz stood at right angles to the wall, an ugly, lime-washed barn boasting a verandah and a stoep where, when the weather was warm, Sadi Hafiz himself sat in a faded drawing-room chair drinking mint tea and smoking. He was a tall, pale Moor with plump cheeks and a smear of beard, and he had the appearance at all times of being half-awake. He sat one morning, a cigarette drooping from his full underlip, his dull eyes fixed upon a wilted geranium in the centre of the court.

The Shereef Sadi Hafiz was a man who had held many positions of trust under many governments, but had not held them for long. He had served two sultans and four pretenders, had been the confidential agent of six European and one American consulates and in turn had robbed or betrayed them all. A linguist of ability, a known friend of the brown-legged men who carried their rifles into Tangier whenever they came shopping, his influence reached into strange and distant places, and he was a concession-monger without equal.

There came to him at the sunset hour a little man named Colport, who was the accredited agent in Tangier of Mr. Ralph Hamon's companies.

"Good evening—have a drink," grunted the shereef in English. "Did you get any reply to your cable?"

"He says the quarter's allowance is not due for a month," said Colport and the Moor spat contemptuously.

"Did he spend twenty pesetas to cable that? Allah! If it is not due for twenty months I need money now, Colport. Is he coming?"

"I don't know; he didn't say."

The Moor looked at him from under his tired eyelids.

"Is Lydia coming with him? Of course! For five years she has been coming, and for five years she cannot. I am tired of Hamon. He treats me worse than Israel Hassim the Jew. I give him companies, he makes millions and all I see is the allowance. Sha! What did I do for Hamon years ago? Ask him that!"

Colport listened philosophically. Sadi was for ever complaining, for ever hinting of mysterious services; he never went further than to hint.

"He would see me in the Kasbah, chained by the leg and dying for a centimo measure of water. And I have two new wonders for him—a trace of silver in the hills! Ah ha, that makes your eyes sparkle. There are fifty million pesetas in that concession alone. Who else could find such beauties but the Shereef? I am the most powerful man in Morocco—greater than a *basha*—greater than the Sultan. . . ."

He grumbled on and Colport waited for his opportunity. It came at last.

"Mr. Hamon says he will let you have your quarter's allowance and five hundred sterling. But you must send at once . . . wait."

He fished out the cablegram from his pocket and smoothed it on his knee.

" 'Tell Sadi I must have another Ali Hassan'—what does that mean, Sadi?"

Sadi's eyes were wide open now, his tobacco-stained fingers were caressing his hairy chin.

"He is in trouble," he said slowly. "I thought he was. Ali Hassans do not grow on every cactus bush, Colport."

He was silent for a long time, thinking, and his thoughts were not pleasant. After a while he said:

"Cable to him that it will cost a thousand," he said. "Bring the money to me in the evening of to-morrow. Even then . . . but I will see."

He clapped his hands lazily and to the slave girl who came:

"Bring tea, you black beast," he said pleasantly.

He paid Colport the unusual honour of walking with him to the gate, and then he went back to his dingy chair and sat, elbow on knee, chin in hand, until the call to prayer sent him to his perfunctory devotions.

He rose stiffly from his knees and called to the man who was his scribe and valet.

"Do you know Ahmet, the mule driver?"

"Yes, Excellency. He is the man that killed the money changer, and some say he robbed another Jew and threw him down a well. He is a bad man."

"Does he speak English?"

"Spanish and English, they say. He was a guide at Casa Blanca, but he stole from a woman and was flogged."

Sadi inclined his head.

"He must be my Ali Hassan," he said. "Go into the low houses by the beach. If he is drunk leave him, for I do not wish the French police to see him. If he is sober, let him come to me at the twelfth hour."

Tangier's one striking clock was chiming midnight when the servant admitted the burly figure of the mule man.

"Peace on this house and may God give you happy dreams!" he said, when the white-robed figure of the shereef confronted him in the moonlight.

"Ahmet, you have been to England?"

They stood in the centre of the courtyard, away from the ears that listened at three lattice-covered windows.

"Yes, Shereef, many times on the mule ships when the War was on."

"Go now, Ahmet. There is a man who needs you. Remember that I saved you from death twice. Twice, when the rope was round your neck, I, the Shereef Sadi of Ben-Aza, pleaded

to the *basha* and saved you. There will be nobody to save you in England if you are a fool. Come to me to-morrow and I will give you a letter."

CHAPTER XXXI

Joan Tells the Truth

JIM MORLAKE returned home in the early hours of the morning. At half-past three, Spooner saw the white window shade go up and Jim appeared, silhouetted against the bright light of the room. In another second he opened the French windows and stepped out, crossing the lawn to the gate. The detective drew back to the shadows, but Jim's voice hailed him.

"Is that you, Finnigan, or is it Spooner?"

"Spooner," said the officer a little sheepishly, as he came forward.

"Come inside and have a large glass of ice water," said Jim, opening the gate. "Pretty cold waiting, wasn't it?"

"How did you know we were here?"

Jim laughed.

"Don't be silly," he said. "Of course I knew you were here. Say when."

The detective drank the potion that was offered him and smacked his lips.

"I think it is silly, too," he said, "wasting a good man's time——"

"Two good men," corrected Jim.

"Don't you ever get any sleep?" asked the detective, selecting a cigar from the box Jim handed him.

"Very rarely," replied his host gravely. "It freshens me up, walking up and down this room."

"How do you do it? I only notice you pass the window one way."

"I walk round the table as a rule. It is quite a good stretch," said the other carelessly. "What I principally wanted to speak to you about, Spooner, was to ask you whether you had heard anybody shouting, or whether insomnia is getting on my nerves?"

Mr. Spooner shook his head.

"I've heard nobody shout. It must be your imagination. From what direction did it come?"

"From the meadows on the other side of the river," said Jim. "But if you didn't hear it, it is not worth while investigating."

"Is there a bridge?" asked the detective, glad of any diversion. "What sort of a noise was it?"

"It sounded like a cry for help to me," said Jim. "If you think it is worth while, I'll get a lamp and we'll go and look."

He lit a storm lantern and they crossed the lawn to the little footbridge. He led the way over the bridge.

"It was from this field that the cry seemed to come," he said, and then the detective saw a figure lying on the ground and ran toward it.

"What is it?" asked Jim.

"Looks to me like a drunk. Here, wake up!"

He dragged the inanimate figure to its knees and shook it vigorously by the shoulder.

"Wake up, you! It is the young man who lives at Mrs. Cornford's cottage," said Spooner suddenly.

"I thought I recognised him," said Jim. "I wonder how the dickens he got here. Perhaps you'll see him home?"

After the detectives with their half-conscious burden had gone their staggering way to the village, Jim returned to the house. Not only the work of the night had been heavy—and Marborne's burglar-proof safe had been one of the hardest jobs he had ever tackled—but the responsibility of this half-crazy dipsomaniac had added a new tax on his strength. He had gone back for the car he had left near Shaftesbury Avenue and had deposited the drunkard in a corner just in time to

save him from arrest. Mr. Ferdie Farringdon had slept in the car what time Jim went about his unlawful occasions. He had slept all the way down and in the end Jim had had to half-carry and half-walk him from the place where he had left the machine to Wold House. Here he had settled him comfortably in the meadow of Creith Hall before it occurred to him that he might utilise the detectives who were watching him, to save the sleeping man from the serious consequences of his folly.

He went up to his bedroom, counted the heap of notes that he took from an inside pocket, put them in an envelope and addressed them, before he placed the implements of his craft in the secret hole beneath the carpet.

He had failed, but his failure was less oppressive to him than the strange story that Farringdon had told. It could not be Joan—and yet, her father was a peer; she had the heart-shaped scar on the back of her hand, and her name was Joan.

"It's preposterous!" he muttered. "Preposterous! How could Joan ruin any man's life? Why, she's only a child . . ."

It was the mad babble of a drunken man, he tried to tell himself, but reason would not accept that explanation. He made a resolve. At whatever risk, he would call upon Mr. Ferdinand Farringdon in the morning and ask for an explanation.

He slept for four hours, and, waking, took a cold bath and dressed. His first thoughts on waking, as were his last thoughts on sleeping, revolved about the dipsomaniac and his strange statements.

After swallowing a cup of tea that Binger brought to him he mounted his horse and taking the side-road that misses the village came to the gardener's cottage. He had never seen Mrs. Cornford before and his first impression was a correct one. She was a lady, as he had expected her to be. He had heard, not from Joan, but from those prolific sources of gossip which existed in Creith, that she was a friend of the girl's.

"My name is Morlake," he said, watching her keenly. "I'm

glad to see that you do not faint at the approach of a member of the criminal classes," he added, as she smiled her recognition of his name. "I want to see your boarder."

"Mr. Farringdon?" Her face changed. "I'm afraid you can't see him; he's very ill. He is an invalid, you know, and he went out yesterday afternoon when I was shopping in the village and did not come home until late this morning. I have just sent for the doctor."

"Is he very ill?" asked Jim. "I mean, too ill to see me?"

She nodded.

"I'm afraid he has fever; his temperature is high and he is not normal in other ways. Do you know him very well?" she asked.

"Not very well. I know something about him, that is all."

She was evidently not prepared to discuss the eccentric young man who lodged with her, and Jim had to return. He turned his horse and rode across the fields to No Man's Hill, a ride of which he was particularly fond. He could learn no more until the man had recovered—if he ever did recover. That kind of person had nine and ninety lives, he reflected, and he could wait until he sought an explanation from a saner and a more convincing Mr. Farringdon.

It was freakish of him to turn from the well-known road to send his horse climbing the hill, threading a slow way between the pines and the rhododendrons, but he had a sudden desire for the solitude which hill-tops give to man. He could not see the crest for the surrounding trees, and until he rode clear to the flat top, he was unaware that there was another early morning rider. Suddenly he came face to face with Joan. She was sitting her horse, a quizzical smile in her eyes, and she laughed aloud at his look of surprise.

"Father came back to Creith last night," she said. "Our humdrum life has been resumed, and we expect the Hamon man at any moment."

"Congratulations!"

"And do you know there was a burglary in London last night? It looked very, very much like one of yours!"

Her eyes were fixed on him steadily.

"Base imitation," said Jim. "Will you make me responsible for every robbery——"

"Was it you?" she asked.

He swung from the saddle with a laugh.

"You're a most disconcerting young lady, and I shan't satisfy your curiosity."

"Will you tell me it wasn't you?" she bent down toward him, watching him closely.

"Mr. James Morlake refuses to make any statement; this is official," said Jim.

"It *was* you!" She caught her breath in a sigh. "I was afraid it was, though they are perfectly certain in the village that you didn't leave Wold House."

"As a matter of fact, I did leave Wold House, and I was in London last night. Whatever evil work I did, at least I performed one kindly action. I saved a young man from being arrested for drunkenness, and I brought him home to his good, kind Mrs. Cornford."

Her face went deathly white.

"That was kind of you," she said steadily.

"Do you know this man?"

She did not answer.

"Has he any reason to hate you?"

She shook her head.

"Joan, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I'm always in trouble," she said lightly, "and have been since I was so high!"

"I see you won't answer me. Will you tell me this?" He found difficulty in framing the words. "Joan—if, if I were not—if I were a respectable member of society and could claim to be . . . of your own class—would you marry me?"

Her eyes, deep and sombre, held his as she shook her head.

"No," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because . . . you asked me about Ferdie Farringdon just now."

"Well?" as she paused.

He saw her lick her dry lips, and then:

"He is my husband," she said, and, pulling round her horse's head, she sent it at full gallop down the uneven path.

CHAPTER XXXII

Captain Welling Understands

He was dreaming, he told himself mechanically. It couldn't be true; it was too absurd to think about. She had been shocking him as she had shocked Lydia Hamon. Of course it wasn't true. How could it be? She was only a child. . . .

He found himself with drawn reins before the Cornford cottage. He could go in there and learn the truth—could drag it from the drunkard. Then he saw the doctor coming out and the old man nodded to him cheerily.

"How is your patient?" Jim found voice to say.

"Pretty bad. I think he's got rheumatic fever. He has little or no resistance, so what will happen to him heaven only knows. You look a bit under the weather, Morlake. I haven't seen you since you came from your——"

"Since I came from Brixton Prison," smiled Jim. "No, I don't think we've met. You needn't worry about me, doctor. I'm as fit as the Derby favourite."

"My experience is that they are usually unfit," growled the doctor, "though you never discover it until after the race is won and you've lost your money."

He walked by Jim's side into the village.

"Queer fish, that man Farringdon," he said, breaking the silence. "A college man, I should think, but a queer fish. He is quite delirious to-day and the things he is saying would make your hair stand on end. Happily," he said after a moment's thought, "I am bald. Ever heard of the Midnight Monks?"

"Eh?" said Jim.

"Midnight Monks. I wonder if, in your wider knowledge

of the world, you may have heard of them. Some sort of secret society, I should think. He's been babbling about them all the time, though it is not my business to give away my patient's secrets. The only satisfaction you can get out of my unprofessional conduct is that I shall probably give away yours. Hm! The Midnight Monks and Joan," he mused. "I wonder what Joan it is?"

Jim did not answer and he rambled on.

"It is a common enough name. Have you ever noticed how names go in cycles? All the Marjories belong to '96; they're contemporary with the Doras and the Dorothys. And all the Joans are about twelve years old. Just now there is an epidemic of Margarets. It is a curious world," he added inconsequently, as, with a wave of his hand, he dived into his surgery.

Jim did not hear him.

That must be the explanation. She was shocking him in her impish way. He told himself this with a firmness that sought to mask his act of self-deception.

He was turning into Wold House when a big Italian car swept past. He caught a glimpse of a face, and turning his horse, watched the car out of sight. Hamon's presence would bring happiness to nobody, he reflected. It certainly gave him none.

"The hofficers of the law have been 'ere," hissed Binger melodramatically, coming half-way down the drive to meet him.

"Which particular hofficers? And, by-the-way, I'll have to be careful or I shall be talking like you."

"I was always considered a very classy talker in my military days," said Binger complacently. "I remember once my colonel telling me——"

"Shut up about your colonel. Let's get down to common busy fellows. Do you mean Spooner or Finnigan?"

"All of 'em," said Binger. "He saw William—it's funny his name being William and mine being William——"

"It is so funny that I'm screaming with laughter," said Jim impatiently. "What did he say to William?"

"He wanted to know whether you were out last night. It was the other fellow who asked the question. And William said that so far as he knew you were hindoors. And, of course, I knew that you were hindoors, so I gave my testimony hunsolicited, as it were."

"When did they go?"

"They're not gone. They're in the study," said Mr. Binger. "And the other gentleman—there was three—he said he felt faint and would like to sit down away from the glare of the sun."

"There has been no sun for a month. I gather the other gentleman's name is Welling. It sounds rather like him."

"That's right, sir—Mr. Welling. An old gentleman, not very right in his head, I should think—childish as a matter of fact. He's had that gramophone on the table and has been asking what the little holes in the side were for. It's hawful to see a man in the prime of life talk like that."

"Horrible," agreed Jim in all sincerity.

When he walked into the study, Welling was examining with an air of quiet, detached admiration a big etching that hung over the carved mantelpiece. He bent his head sideways, looking over his glasses as Jim came in.

"Here you are then, Morlake," he said. "I think you're looking remarkably well."

"The village doctor has just passed an opinion which is directly contrary, but I guess you know," said Jim as he shook hands.

"I thought I'd look you up," said Welling. He had a trick of thrusting his chin into the air and looking down at his *vis-à-vis*. The taller they were, the farther rose his chin. His face was almost turned to the ceiling as he regarded Jim with that queer pale stare which had broken down so many obdurate and uncommunicative criminals.

"I only discovered last night that, outside of all my knowledge, the Yard had sent two men down to shadow you. Now, that's not right," he said, shaking his head. "It isn't right at all. The moment I discovered this, I decided that I would

come down personally and withdraw these officers. I can't have you annoyed; you must have your chance, Morlake."

Jim laughed aloud.

"I haven't the slightest doubt, Welling, that you were the gentleman who sent these sleuths to watch me," he said.

"And I have less doubt," said Welling frankly, "that I did send them! That is the worst of our business," he shook his head mournfully. "We have to lie! Such unnecessary lies. I sometimes shudder when I recall the stories I have to tell in the course of a day. That is a nice little gramophone of yours. Have you any records?"

"Plenty," said Jim promptly.

"Ah! I set it going just now."

He turned the switch as he spoke and the turn-table slowly revolved.

"Very slow, eh? Now, I've been thinking that, if you had a lamp on the top of that turn-table and a figure cut in the shape of a man, so placed that every time the dial turned the shadow fell across that blind—how's that for an idea? When I write my little text-book for burglars, that notion is going to be put very prominently—with illustrations."

Jim turned the regulator and the disc spun quickly.

"It only shows how even a clever plan can come unstuck for want of an elementary precaution," he said. "I should have turned that back to full speed if I had been a criminal and had been endeavouring to deceive the good, kind police. You mustn't forget to put those instructions in your text-book, Welling."

"No, I mustn't," agreed the other warmly. "Thank you very much."

He looked round at Spooner and his superior.

"All right, sergeant, I don't think you need wait. You can take Spooner back to town with you by the next train. I will join you at the station. In the meantime, I want just a little private talk with Mr. Morlake—just a little exchange of reminiscences, shall we say?" he beamed.

He walked to the window and watched the two officers disappear.

"They're very good fellows," he said, turning, "but they have no brains. Beyond that, they are perfect policemen. In fact, they are the ideal of our force. Where were you last night, Morlake?" He asked the question curtly.

"Where do you think I was?" said Jim, taking down his pipe from the mantelshelf and loading it.

"I think you were at 302, Cambridge Circus, opening the safe of my friend Mr. Marborne. When I say 'I think' I mean I know. That isn't the game, Morlake," he shook his head reproachfully. "Dog does not eat dog, nor thief rob thief. And that Marborne was the biggest thief that ever wore a uniform jacket, heaven and the Commissioner know. You made a killing, but did you get what you wanted?"

"I did not get what I wanted," said Jim.

"Then why take the money?"

"What money?" asked Jim innocently.

"I see." Captain Welling settled himself down on a settee and pulled up the knees of his trousers as outward evidence that he intended making a long stay. "I see we shall have to bicker awhile, Morlake."

"Don't," begged Jim. "I only take money when the money I want belongs to the man I am after."

Welling nodded.

"I guessed that. But this was Marborne's own—money dishonestly earned, and therefore his by right. What is Marborne's pull with Hamon?"

"Blackmail, I should imagine—in fact, I am pretty certain. He has come into possession of a document which is very incriminating to Hamon, and he is bleeding that gentleman severely; that is my diagnosis."

Again Welling nodded.

"Now we come to the one mystery that intrigues me," he said. "There is a document, which you want to get, and which you say Marborne has got. It is a document, the publication of which, or should it fall into the hands of the law officers, would lead to very disastrous consequences to Hamon. Have I stated the matter right?"

"As nearly as possible," said Jim.

"Very well, then." Welling ticked off the points on his finger-tips. "First, we have a document, a letter, a statement, and anything you like, the publication of which will, let us say, put Hamon in a very awkward position. Now, tell me this: is there anything in that document which it is absolutely necessary Hamon should keep?"

"Nothing," said Jim.

"Then why on earth doesn't he destroy it?" asked Welling in amazement.

A slow smile dawned on Jim's face.

"Because he's a monkey," he said. "He's put his hand into the gourd and he has grasped the fruit; he cannot get his hand out without letting go his prize."

"But you say that there is nothing in the wording of this paper which can possibly advantage him, and yet he does not destroy it! That is incredible. I've heard he is a miser, somebody told me that he's got thirty pairs of boots that he's hoarded since his childhood. But why on earth does he hoard a thing which may——"

"Put his head in a noose," suggested Jim, and Welling's face went grave.

"As bad as that?" he asked quietly. "I had a feeling it might be. The man is mad—stark, staring, raving mad. To hold on to evidence that can convict him—why, there's no precedent in the history of jurisprudence. A man may keep a document through sheer carelessness, or forgetfulness, but deliberately to hoard it! Is it something he has written?"

Jim shook his head.

"It is something written by another, accusing him of conspiracy to defraud and attempted murder."

Captain Welling was a man who was not readily surprised, but now he sat speechless with amazement.

"I give it up," he said. "It is killing Hamon, anyway. I saw him yesterday and he looked like a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

"I should hate to see Hamon die—naturally," said Jim. "He's down here, by-the-way."

Welling nodded.

"Yes, he telegraphed to Lord Creith this morning, asking if he could put him up. He has sent his sister away to Paris." He scratched his chin. "One would like to get to the bottom of this," he said. "I have an idea that we should discover a little more than you know or guess."

"There is nothing bad about Hamon that I cannot guess," said Jim.

He liked Welling and would, in other circumstances, have gladly spent the day with him; but now he was not in the mood for company and was relieved when the old man took his departure. Jim was sick at heart, miserable beyond belief. The shock of Joan Carston's declaration had stunned him. She would not play with him; she must have spoken the truth. Twice that afternoon he found himself riding in the direction of Mrs. Cornford's cottage, and once he stopped and asked after the patient, and his enquiry was not wholly disinterested.

"He is very ill, but the doctor takes a more hopeful view," said the lady. "Lady Joan very kindly came and brought some wine for him."

A little pang shot through Jim Morlake's heart, but he was ashamed of himself the next minute.

"Of course she would," he said, and Mrs. Cornford smiled at him.

"You are a friend of hers—she spoke of you to-day."

"Do you know anything at all about Mr. Farringdon?" he asked her.

"Nothing, except that he has no friends. An allowance comes to him from a firm of lawyers in the city. I wish I knew where I could find his relations, they ought to be told. But he speaks of nobody except these 'Midnight Monks' and the only name he mentions besides that of a girl is one which seems very familiar to me—Bannockwaite. It has some sort of significance for me, but I can't tell what."

Jim had heard the name before and it was associated in his mind with something unsavoury. A thought struck him. He had passed Welling in the village street, and the old man had

told him that he was staying on for a day or two and Jim had asked him up to dinner. He rode back to the Red Lion where the detective was staying and found him in the public bar, the least conscious of its habitués, and he was drinking beer out of a shining tankard.

"Do you know anybody named Bannockwaite?"

"I knew a man named Bannockwaite," said Welling instantly, "and a rascal he was! You remember the case? A young parson who got into a scrape and was fired out of the church. There was nothing much wrong with him, except natural devilry and a greater mistake than choosing a clerical career I cannot imagine. Then he was mixed up with a West End gang of cardsharpers and came into our hands, but there was no case against him. When the War broke out he got a commission—in his own name, remarkably enough. He did magnificently, earned the V.C., and was killed on the Somme. You probably remember him in connection with one of those societies he started. He never actually came into our hands on that score——"

"What do you mean by societies?"

"He had a mania for forming secret societies. In fact, when he was at school, he initiated one which disorganised not only his own school but a dozen in the neighbourhood. He was something of a mystic, I think, but devilry was his long suit."

"What was his school? I suppose you wouldn't know that?"

"Curiously enough I do. It was Hulston—a big school in Berkshire."

Jim went back and wrote to the headmaster at Hulston, hoping most fervently that the schoolmaster would not recognise him as the hero of an Old Bailey trial. Late in the afternoon he saw Hamon's car flash past toward London and wondered what urgent business was taking the financier back to town. Long after midnight he heard the peculiar roar of the Italian engine, and, looking through the window, saw the car returning.

"He is a very busy fellow in these days," thought Jim, and he thought correctly, for Ralph Hamon had spent two

hours in a profitable interview with a stranger, who had arrived in London and the conversation had been carried on exclusively in Arabic.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Foreign Sailor

THERE was no man more sympathetic for a fellow in misfortune than ex-Sergeant Slone. But when he discovered that the misfortune extended to himself, Slone was inclined to be querulous.

"I don't mind you doing what you like with your own money, Marborne," he said, "but there was four hundred of mine in that safe of yours, and I've been asking you for a week to put it in your bank."

"You wouldn't have had the money if it wasn't for me," said Marborne. "Anyway, there's plenty more where that came from."

"But have you got plenty more?" asked the practical Slone.

"He sent five hundred this morning. It was like getting blood out of a stone," said Marborne. "Anyway, we shan't starve. Slone, I've been sitting up all night, thinking about things."

"I don't wonder," said Slone, his gloomy eyes surveying the empty safe. "That's The Black's work, nobody else could have done it so neatly."

"What did he come for?"

"Money," said Slone bitterly. "What do you think he came for—to pass the evening?"

"You needn't get fresh with me," said Marborne sharply. "You'll pay the same respect to me, Sergeant Slone, as you did in the old days, or you and I part company. I've told you that before."

"I meant no harm," growled Slone, "but it is a bit of a blow losing all that money."

"The Black didn't come for it. He took it, but that wasn't what he came for. He came for this." He tapped his side significantly. "And that is what The Black has been after ever since he started operations. He's been after *this!* I was looking up my scrap-book this morning. I've got every one of The Black's robberies pasted, and I'll tell you what I discovered —and, mind you, Slone, I haven't been a police officer for twenty-three years without being able to put two and two together."

"That's natural," agreed the obliging Slone. "And I'll say this of you, Marborne—there wasn't a better detective officer at the Yard than yourself—not even Welling."

"You're a fool," said Marborne. "Welling could give me or anybody else a mile start and lick 'em sick. Now listen; every bank that's been burgled has been a bank where Hamon has had an account. In all banks there is a strong room, where customers keep their private documents, and it invariably has been the strong room that was burgled. And if it wasn't a bank it was a safe deposit, where Ralph Hamon had a private box. And he's been after this." He tapped his side again.

"What is it?" asked Slone, consumed with curiosity, and the other man smiled contemptuously.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he asked, and continued: "This fellow Morlake is a rich man. I've always suspected he was a rich man——"

"Naturally he's rich," put in Slone wrathfully.

"Wouldn't you be rich if you'd pulled off forty-two jobs and got away with thousands and thousands of pounds? He's richer by four hundred of mine——"

"Don't interrupt me. He is a rich man apart from that. And, besides, nobody knows that he *has* taken any money."

"I know he's taken ours," said Slone bitterly.

"Fix this in your nut, Slone. It is just as likely that he would pay me as well for this, as old Hamon would."

"He'd sooner pinch it," said Slone with conviction, "like he pinched my money. I wish I'd been somewhere handy!"

"You'd have been a dead man if you had, so what is the good of wishing? I'm going to think this over and if I have any trouble with Mr. Blinking Hamon to-morrow——" He snapped his fingers significantly.

Slone went home early. He had yet to recover from the shock of his loss, and Marborne was left alone. He had plenty to occupy his thoughts. The sting of Lydia Hamon's contempt still smarted. She seemed, at that moment, less the woman of his dreams than she had been, and he harboured no other emotion in his bosom than a desire to get even with her for her gratuitous insult.

That morning he had sent a peremptory demand to Hamon, and had received a paltry five hundred. He had instantly despatched a second message, to learn that Hamon had gone out of town, which Marborne regarded as the merest subterfuge, until he called himself and interviewed the butler. Miss Hamon had gone too, that official informed him; she had left by the eleven o'clock Continental train and was expected to be absent for a week.

Although the night was chilly, he threw open the windows to let in the light and sound of Cambridge Circus. Almost under his eyes were the gay lights of a theatre. He sat for some time watching the audience arrive, and trying to recognise them, for he had an extensive acquaintance with West End life.

He saw a tall, thick-set man cross the road at a run, although there was no fear of his intercepting the traffic. A foreigner, Marborne guessed. He watched him for some time, for the man did not seem quite sure of his destination. First he walked along one sector of the Circus, then he came back and stood undecidedly on one of the islands in the middle of the thoroughfare. By the light of the street standard Marborne thought he was a seafaring man. He wore a jersey up to his neck, a thick pea-jacket and a cheese-cutter cap. Turning his eyes away to watch a car drive up to the theatre, Marborne lost sight of the stranger and he passed out of his mind.

He closed the window and, taking a pack of cards from a drawer, began to play solitaire. He was nervous, jumpy;

he heard sounds and whispering voices which he knew were born in his imagination. At last, unable to bear the solitude any longer, he put on his hat and went out, wandering down Shaftesbury Avenue to Piccadilly Circus, where he stood for an hour watching the night signs. Here, to his surprise and relief, he came upon Slone.

"I've got the creeps," said that worthy. "Marborne, what do you say to making a big haul from this fellow and getting out of the country? You remember what Welling told you—that the north of Spain is healthy?"

Marborne nodded. Something of the same idea had occurred to him.

"I think you're right," he said. "I'll wire to Hamon in the morning, he's staying with Lord Creith; and I'll put the matter frankly before him. It will be Italy, not Spain."

"Hamon is in town," said Slone unexpectedly. "I saw his car passing along Coventry Street, and he was in it."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, you couldn't mistake him, could you?" said Slone scornfully.

"Wait a bit." Marborne went into a telephone booth and called up Hamon's house.

"It is no good lying," he said, when the butler protested that his master was not in. "Hamon was seen in Coventry Street an hour ago."

"I swear to you, Mr. Marborne, he has gone to the country. I know he came back to town to do some business because I forwarded a coded message on to him and he came back for ten minutes—not longer. He's gone away again."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he is telling the truth," said Marborne when he reported the conversation. "Anyway, we'll see him to-morrow."

He parted from his friend in Shaftesbury Avenue and walked back to Cambridge Circus, feeling a little more cheerful than he had been when he came out. And then he saw the tall, foreign-looking sailor, and the first thing that impressed him was his big pale face and his tiny black moustache. He was standing near the door of the apartment as Marborne inserted

the key, watching the ex-inspector until the door opened. Then he came forward, cap in hand.

"Excuse me," he said, speaking with a guttural accent, "but are you Marborne?"

"That is my name," said the other.

"I have this for you." The stranger held up a large envelope. "It is from Mr. Hamon. But first I must be sure that you are Marborne."

"Come in," said Marborne quickly.

Hamon had relented, he thought joyously. That parcel meant money and Hamon employed curious messengers at times. He opened the door for the big man, who had come silently up the stairs behind him, and the messenger passed through. He looked hard at his host.

"You are Marborne?" he said. He spoke English with great difficulty.

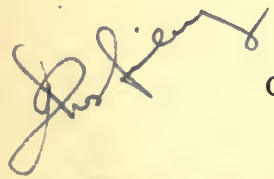
"Yes, I am that gentleman," said Marborne almost jovially, and the man laid the package on the table.

"That is for you," he said. "Will you please open and give me a sign?"

"You mean signature."

"That's the word—signature."

Marborne wrenched the string from the package and tore open the envelope. For a second his back was to the visitor and Ahmet, the muleman, drew a curved knife from each pocket and struck inward and upward with a deep-throated "Huh!"



CHAPTER XXXIV

The Cord

WHAT made Marborne raise his eyes, he did not know. In the glass above the mantelpiece he saw the glitter of the knife and leapt forward, pushing the table with him. He had turned to

confront the assassin and in that instant he lifted the edge of the table and flung it over against his assailant. His gun came into his hand and the lights went out simultaneously; for though Ahmet, the muleman, was a barbarian, he lived in a city that was lit by electric light, and he knew the value of a near-by switch.

Marborne heard the patter of his feet on the stairs and ran after him, tripping and falling over the table. By the time the lights were on, the stairs and passage were empty. There was no sign of the sailor in the street, and double-locking the door, he came back to his room and reached for a handy whisky bottle, and he did not trouble to dilute the fluid.

"The swine!" he breathed. He put down the bottle and examined the letter that the man had dropped.

It consisted of a package of old newspapers.

So that was it! He had, as Welling told him, tinned the wildcat and the cat had shown his claws.

He was cool now, in mind if not in body, for his forehead was streaming. So that was Hamon—the real Hamon, who would stick at nothing to get back the thing he had lost. He sat for half-an-hour, then, rising, took off his coat, his vest, his shirt, and then the silk singlet beneath. Fastened to his body with strips of sticking plaster was a small bag of oiled silk, through which he could read certain of the words which appeared on the document which Hamon, no less than Morlake, so greatly desired.

He fixed two fresh strips of sticking plaster, dressed himself, and, examining his revolver carefully, slipped it into his hip pocket. There was only one thing to be done, and that must be done immediately. He had a thought of calling on Slone, but Slone might easily complicate matters, and he decided on the whole that it would be best if he worked alone. He must go at once, before the would-be murderer recovered from his fright. He put on his overcoat, took a loaded cane from the hall stand, and went out.

Jim Morlake was the solution to his difficulties and the shield to his danger. He saw that with startling clearness. Closing the

door behind him, he looked left and right, but, as he expected, there was no sign of the foreign-looking sailor.

A cab took him to Victoria, and he found he had half-an-hour to wait for a train to the nearest railway junction. Another whisky fortified him for the journey, and he ensconced himself in the corner of a first-class carriage which was occupied by two other men.

At eleven o'clock that night, Jim, who was genuinely working in his study, heard feet coming up the gravel drive, and, opening the door, was audience to a parley between Binger and some unknown person. Presently Binger came in in a state of great excitement.

"It's that damned Marborne," he whispered.

"Show him in," said Jim, after a moment's thought.

What would Marborne be wanting, he wondered? That he should suspect Jim of being The Black was natural, but he would hardly have taken a journey at that hour of the night, either to express his reproaches or to conduct a cross-examination.

"Bring him in here."

Marborne was looking very haggard and drawn, he thought. He expected trouble, but the man's attitude and manner were civility itself.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you at this time of night, Mr. Morlake," he said, "and I hope that you won't think I've come to see you about that little job last night."

Jim was silent.

"The fact of the matter is," said Marborne, dropping his voice, "I'm in——" Suddenly he spun round. "What's that?" he croaked.

There was a crunch of slow footsteps on the gravel outside.

"Who is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"I'll find out," said Jim.

He himself opened the door to the visitor.

"Come in, Welling. You're the second last person I expected to see."

"And who was the first?" asked Welling.

"An old friend of yours, who has just arrived—Marborne."

The white eyebrows of Captain Welling rose.

"Marborne! How interesting! Has he come down to get his money back?"

"I thought that at first," said Jim good-humouredly, "and of course, I couldn't very well refuse. No, I think it is something more serious than the loss of money that is bothering him."

Marborne's relief at seeing Jim's visitor was so evident that Jim was puzzled.

"Expecting a friend, Marborne?" said Julius genially.

"No—no, sir," stammered the man.

"I thought you weren't. You can put your gun away. Very bad business, carrying guns. I'm surprised at an old policeman like you thinking of such things. A good stick is all that a policeman needs—a good stick and the first blow!"

Something of Marborne's nerve had returned at the sight of the man who, more than any other, had been responsible for his ruin. He seemed suddenly to rid himself of the terror which had enveloped him like a cloud a few moments before.

"I won't trouble you about my business to-night, Mr. Morlake. Perhaps you could give me a few minutes in the morning?"

"If I'm in the way——" began Welling.

"No, sir. Where can I sleep to-night? I suppose there's an hotel here?"

"There is an inn," said Welling, "the Red Lion. I'm staying there myself. But I can wait; my business isn't very important. I merely wanted to ask Mr. Morlake a question or two."

"No, the morning will do," said Marborne.

He had come to a definite decision. Hamon should have his last chance. He was here, within a stone's throw. In the morning he would make his offer, and perhaps, with the accusation of an attempted murder hanging over his head, Hamon would pay more handsomely and more readily.

"You'll find two other friends of yours waiting outside—Milligan and Spooner," said Julius Welling. "Don't corrupt them, Marborne!"

"I thought you'd sent your bloodhounds back to town?" asked Jim when Marborne had gone.

"I did, but the man who was responsible for their being here sent them back to Creith by the next train. In our service, Mr. Morlake, it is a great mistake for one department to butt into the affairs of another. Messrs. Spooner and Milligan are not in my department."

He chuckled at this little comedy of inter-departmental dignity.

"But I'll shift them. I'll have them moved for you. I came up to-night to tell you that they were here—I shouldn't like you to think that I'd broken a promise. To-morrow I will apply humbly to the superintendent whom I asked to send these men, that he will be gracious enough to withdraw them, and they will be withdrawn. What is wrong with Marborne?"

"I don't know. He talked about being in something—I think he was going to say 'danger.' Maybe he has been drinking."

Welling shook his head.

"He wasn't drunk," he said. "I wonder what he means?" He was talking to himself. "We'll have him back, Morlake. He'll be talking with those fellows of mine."

They went out into the road together and the two detectives who were waiting for Welling's return came over to them.

"Is Marborne there?"

"No, sir," said Milligan.

"Has he gone?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir. I haven't seen him."

"You haven't what?" almost shouted Welling. "Didn't he come out of this gate two minutes ago?"

"No, sir," the two men spoke together. "Nobody came out of that gate until you came out."

There was a silence.

"Have either of you men got a lamp?"

For answer, Milligan's pocket torch shot a fan of light on to the ground, and, seizing the lamp, Welling walked back, sweeping the drive from left to right.

Half-way between the gates and the house he stopped and turned the light on to the bushes that bordered the drive.

Marborne lay face downward. There was a slight wound at the back of his head, but it was the knotted silk cord wound tightly around his throat that had killed him.

CHAPTER XXXV

The Letter That Came by Post

"He's dead, I'm afraid," said Jim, at the end of half-an-hour's work on the still figure that lay on the floor of the study.

Stripped to his singlet, he had applied artificial respiration, but without effect. The man must have died a few seconds before they found him.

"Thorough!" said Welling, biting his lip thoughtfully, "very thorough and very quick. Searched to the skin, you notice."

The dead man's clothes had been torn open, so that his breast was exposed.

"That is where the mystery was hidden—fastened to his skin. It is an old dodge, which Marborne must have learnt in the course of his professional career."

Milligan returned from a search of the grounds, to report failure.

"We can do nothing till daylight, except warn the local police. Put a call through, Spooner. Turn out all the men you can find to search the meadows; the murderer must have gone that way because he could not have come out of the gate. He may make for one of the woods, but that is doubtful. You know the topography of the country, Morlake; which way would he have gone?"

"It depends entirely whether he knew it also," said Jim. "I suggest the footbridge across the river and the riverside path to the Amdon Road. But there are half-a-dozen ways that he may have gone if he can climb, and I should imagine that if

you make an inspection of the walls, you will find that he has gone that way."

But here he was wrong.

Neither daylight nor beaters brought the murderer into their hands. The only discovery—and that was of first importance—was made by Spooner, who found, on the towpath, a long, curved knife which the assassin had dropped in his hurry.

"Moorish," said Jim. "That is to say, made in Birmingham and sold in Morocco. It is a type that is greatly favoured by the countryfolk, and unless it is a blind I think you can issue an order to pull in any Moor who is found within twenty miles of this place in the next few hours."

The only information that came to them was that a foreign-looking sailor had been seen on the Shoreham Road, but he was not black, added the report virtuously. Welling brought the wire to Jim.

"What do you think of the clever lads?" he groaned. "Not black! I suppose they expected to see a coal-black nigger. What colour would he be?"

"White, as likely as not," said Jim. "Many of the Moors are whiter than you or I."

The London police had searched Marborne's apartments, and his friend had been interviewed. Slone's evidence was that he had seen the dead man only the previous night. He had told him that he was nervous and mentioned the fact that he had seen a foreign sailor in Cambridge Circus who seemed to have lost himself.

"That is our man," said Welling. "He went to Marborne's flat and there was a fight. The dining-room was in disorder, tables and chairs overthrown, and they found a dummy letter addressed to Marborne, which is probably the excuse on which the man secured admission. Marborne must have fought him off and come down to you."

"Why?"

"Obviously because he wanted to sell you the document with which he was blackmailing Hamon. Therefore, he must have thought that Hamon employed the Moor to kill him. Therefore, again, Hamon must be privy to this murder, and."

he added in despair, "there is not enough evidence against Hamon even to justify a search warrant!"

Welling had made Wold House his headquarters—a singular choice, thought and said Ralph Hamon when he was summoned to meet Julius Welling in Jim's study.

"It may be amusing and it may be tragic," said Julius, no longer gentle, "but this place is good enough for me, and therefore I'm afraid it must be good enough for you. You know the news, Mr. Hamon?"

"That Marborne is killed? Yes, poor fellow!"

"A friend of yours?"

"I knew him. Yes, I could almost say that he was a friend of mine," said Hamon.

"When did you see him last?"

"I haven't seen him for several days."

"Was your interview a friendly one?"

"Very. He came to me to borrow some money to start a business."

"And you lent it to him, of course?" said Welling dryly. "And that is intended to explain the financial transactions between you and him?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Ralph Hamon. "Are you suggesting that I'm lying?"

"I'm *telling* you you're lying," said Welling shortly. "I suggest nothing when I'm investigating a charge of murder. I tell you again that you're lying. You gave him money for a purpose of your own. He had some document in his possession which you were anxious to recover, and since he would not return it to you, you paid him large sums of money by way of blackmail."

Hamon's face was grey.

"You're making a statement which may be investigated in a court of law."

"It certainly will, if I catch the murderer," said Welling grimly.

"Has it occurred to you," sneered Hamon, "that this man Harborne was an enemy of Morlake's, and that he was found dead in his grounds?"

"It has occurred to me many times in the night," said Welling. "Only, unfortunately for your theory, Morlake was with me when this man was killed, and the package, which was affixed to his body by strips of sticking plaster, was taken."

He saw the light come into Ralph Hamon's eyes and the drawn look of terror seemed instantly to disappear. It was the most wonderful facial transformation that he had seen in his long experience.

"You didn't know it, eh? Yes, your man got the package all right."

"My man?" said Hamon instantly. "What do you mean? You had better be careful, Welling. You're not so powerful a man at headquarters that you cannot be pulled down!"

"And you're not so wonderful a fellow that you couldn't be hanged," said Welling good-naturedly. "Come, come, Mr. Hamon, we don't want to quarrel; we want to get at the truth. Is it true that Marborne blackmailed you? I'll save you a lot of trouble by telling you that we have absolutely convincing proof that he did so blackmail you. Slone has told us."

Hamon shrugged his shoulders.

"What Slone told you is of no interest to me. I can only tell you that I lent money to this unfortunate man in order to start him in business, and if you have any proof to the contrary, you may produce it."

Nobody knew better than he that no such proof existed. Welling knew that his bluff had failed, but that did not greatly worry him. He tried a new tack.

"You have been sending a number of cables to Morocco recently, mainly in code, one especially in which you referred to Ali Hassan. Who is he?"

Again that look of anxiety came to Hamon's face, only to vanish instantly and leave him his cool, smiling self.

"Now I understand why they call detectives 'busies,'" he said. "You've had a very busy night! Ali Hassan is a brand of Moorish cigar!"

He looked at Jim and Jim nodded in confirmation.

"That is true. It is also the name of a notorious Moorish murderer who was hanged twenty-five years ago."

"Then take your choice," said Hamon with a quiet smile.

"This is your writing?" An envelope was suddenly produced from behind Welling's desk and thrust under the eyes of the other.

"No, it isn't my writing," said Hamon without hesitation. "What do you suggest, Inspector?"

"I suggest that Marborne was killed by a Moor, who was specially brought to this country for the purpose by you."

"In other words, that I am an accessory before and after this murder?"

Welling nodded.

"If the idea wasn't amusing, I should be very angry," said Hamon, "and in all the circumstances, I decline to give you any further information." He paused at the door carefully to fold the top of his soft felt hat. "And you cannot force me—nobody knows that better than you, Captain Welling. You understand—I will give you no further information."

Welling nodded.

"He has already given us more than he knows," he said when the door had closed upon the unwilling witness. "Who is Sadi Hafiz?"

"He is a poisonous rascal who lives in Tangier," said Jim without hesitation, "a man entirely without scruple but immensely useful to people like Hamon and other shady company promoters who want a plausible proposition to put before the public. He is an agent of Hamon's. I knew him years ago—in fact we had a slight shooting match—when I was employed on the survey of a suggested Fez railway. There were remarkable stories about him, some of them incredible. He is certainly the pensioner of half-a-dozen interests, and, I should imagine, has more serious crime or what passes for crime on his conscience than any other man in Morocco."

"Murder, for instance?" asked Welling.

Jim smiled.

"I said 'serious crimes.' Murder isn't a serious crime in the Rifi Hills."

Welling scratched his nose again.

"If we catch this Moorish fellow, he'll talk."

"He'll say nothing against Sadi Hafiz," said Jim promptly. "These shereefs are, in a sense, holy men. Sadi Hafiz could not pass through the streets of Tangier without having the hem of his garments frayed by kissing, and our murderer will die without saying a word to incriminate Sadi or any other person."

The story of the murder came to Joan through her agitated maid, and at first she was seized with a panic.

"In Mr. Morlake's garden? Are you sure?" she faltered.

"Yes, miss. Mr. Welling, a London gentleman, and Mr. Morlake found him, and it was only a minute or two after the poor man had left them that he was killed. Everybody is saying it is a judgment on the village for letting Mr. Morlake stay here."

"Then you can tell everybody they're fools," said Joan relieved.

"And they say that poor gentleman at Mrs. Cornford's is dying."

Joan did not make any reply to this. Later in the morning she went down to the cottage and learnt that the maid's fears were exaggerated.

At luncheon that day the murder was naturally the absorbing interest of conversation, but to Lord Creith alone.

"By gad!" he said with satisfaction. "The jolly old village is coming on! Haven't had a murder here for three hundred years. I was looking up the old records. A gypsy murdered another gypsy and was hanged at the top of No Man's Hill. They called it Gibbet Hill for a hundred years. What is your theory, Hamon? I understand you went down and saw the police?"

"I saw the police—yes," said Hamon shortly, "but what is the sense of discussing the matter with men of their limited intelligence? Welling is an old dotard, entirely under the thumb of that damned thief——"

"That thief," corrected Lord Creith with a bland smile. "We never damn anybody at this table unless my daughter is—er—not here. You were talking about Morlake, of course? So the police are under his thumb? Well, well, we are getting on! I

thought Welling was an exceptionally bright man; and for his being old, he is two years younger than I, and nobody could call me old! Oh, by the way, Joan, that young man who is staying with Mrs. Cornford and is so ill—do you know who he is?"

Her lips moved, but she did not speak.

"He is young Farringdon—Sir Willoughby Farringdon's son. You remember old Farringdon? The boy was at Hulston College. You were at a school near Hulston of course! Yes, he is young Farringdon—a sad rascal. He got into some scrape at school and was kicked out. Old Willoughby never forgave him. I think he's been drinking too, but that is the old man's fault. All the Farringdons drank too much. I remember his grandfather . . ."

The girl sat rigid, listening without comment.

"Hulston turned out some queer birds," said the earl reminiscently. "There was that fellow Bannockwaite, the rascal! The fellow that started all those tomfool societies in the schools and demoralised them most devilishly. You remember him, Joan?"

"Yes, Father," she said, and something in her tone made Hamon look at her. She was white to the lips. Following the direction of his guest's eyes, Lord Creith jumped up and went to her side.

"Is anything wrong, Joan?" he asked anxiously.

"I feel a little faint—I don't know why. The day has been rather an exciting one. Will you excuse me, Daddy?"

He took her upstairs himself and did not leave her until he had brought half the household to her side.

Lord Creith went down to the village and in a frenzy of investigation found himself ringing the bell of Wold House. It was his first visit and Jim was flabbergasted to see him.

"Come in, Lord Creith," he said. "This is a very unexpected honour."

"If I didn't call now, I never should," said the earl with a twinkle in his eye. "I want to know all about this murder, and most of the police theories."

Jim was silent. He could not detail views which were unflattering to Lord Creith's guest. So he limited his narrative to a very full description of what happened on the night Marborne was killed, and the earl listened attentively. As chief of the local magistrates, it would be his duty to conduct the preliminary enquiry if a charge was brought.

"It is a most extraordinary happening," he said when Jim had finished, "wholly oriential in design and execution. I lived for some years in India and that type of murder is not new to me. Now what are the police theories?"

But here Jim excused himself, and, seeing through the window Welling engaged in directing the measurements which were being taken, he seized the opportunity of taking his lordship to the fountain-head.

"The curious thing is," said Lord Creith, "that I had a feeling that something unusual had happened. I woke an hour earlier than I ordinarily do. I should have heard about it at once from the postman, who is a great gossip, but for some reason or other, we had no early morning post to-day. In fact," Lord Creith meandered on, "only one letter came to Creith House to-day and that was at eleven o'clock and even that was not for me, but for my guest."

Welling spun round.

"For Mr. Hamon?" he asked quickly.

"Yes."

"From London?"

"No, curiously enough, it wasn't from London; it was from a little village about eight miles from here. I meant to ask Hamon who the dickens his correspondent was, but probably he is buying property in the neighbourhood—in fact, I know he is," he added grimly.

"What was the name of the village?"

"Little Lexham."

The detective frowned in an effort of concentration. If it came by the eleven o'clock mail, it would have been posted that morning.

"Was it a thick letter?"

"Yes. The first impression I had was that it had a pocket

handkerchief in it. Why do you ask these questions? Surely my guest's correspondence does not interest you, Captain Welling?"

"It interests me very much. You don't remember the handwriting?"

Lord Creith's brows met.

"I don't quite get the tendency of this inquiry," he said, "but I did notice the handwriting. It was addressed in printed characters."

"Was the envelope a thick one?"

"Yes, I should say it was. I remember it because it was covered with dirty finger-marks, and I asked the postman who had been handling the mail."

Welling made up his mind quickly.

"I am going to take you into my confidence, Lord Creith," he said. "I have reason to believe that Marborne was murdered because he had in his possession a document which Mr. Hamon was anxious to procure."

"Good God!" said Lord Creith aghast.

"If my theory is right—and the document was obviously taken from the body of Marborne—the murderer slipped whatever he found into an addressed envelope which had already been supplied to him. If he is a Moor, he would have enough intelligence to place the letter in the post."

"Do you know what you're saying?" asked Lord Creith breathlessly.

"I'm merely giving you my theory in confidence, and you're entitled to receive it in confidence, Lord Creith, since you are a magistrate in this county. Is it possible to get that envelope?"

Lord Creith thought for a little while.

"Come back to the house with me," he said. "I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my heels—by the time we get to the Hall I shall be more certain of myself."

Hamon was out. He had followed Joan into the park, to her intense annoyance.

"I'm blessed if I know what to do," said his lordship helplessly. "I suppose I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, so go ahead and look at his room."

Welling's search was thorough and rapid; it was also in part fruitless. There was a writing-table and a waste-paper basket, but the basket was empty—had been emptied in the early morning.

"Ah, there it is!" said Welling suddenly and pointed to the large open fireplace.

A scrap of burnt ash had blown into the corner and he picked it up tenderly.

"This is the envelope and something else." There were ashes which were not of paper.

He picked up a small portion and smelt.

"That isn't paper," he said. Welling looked up at the ceiling for inspiration. "No, I can't place it. Will you give me an envelope?"

He collected the ashes into two separate envelopes and put them in his pocket and got downstairs in time to see a weary Joan and her suitor coming up the broad stairs of the terrace before the house. She passed Welling with a little nod and took her father's arm.

"Daddy, can I speak to you?" she said. "Can I come to the library?"

"Certainly, my love," he said, looking at her closely. "You're still very pale; are you sure you ought to be out?"

She nodded.

"I'm quite all right," she said. "You mustn't worry. I wonder how pale you'll be when I—when I tell you what I have to tell you?"

He stopped and looked at her.

"And I wonder how disappointed in me you'll be?"

Here he shook his head.

"It is going to take a lot to make me disappointed in you, Joan," he said, and put his arm round her shoulder.

She tried hard not to cry, but the strain was terrific. Lord Creith closed the door and led her to a recessed window seat.

"Now, Joan," he said, and his kindly eyes were full of love and sympathy, "confess up."

Twice she tried to speak and failed, and then:

"Daddy, I married Ferdie Farringdon when I was at school," she said in a low voice.

His eyes did not waver.

"A jolly good family, the Farringdons, but addicted to drink," said his lordship, and she fell, sobbing, into her arms.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Bannockwaite Bride

"Now let's hear all about it."

He held her at arm's length.

"And look up, Joan. There's nothing you'll ever do that is going to make any difference to me or my love for you. You're the only person in the world who isn't a bother and who couldn't be a bother."

Presently she told the story.

"Mr. Bannockwaite started it. It was a society called the Midnight Monks. The boys at Hulston used to come over the wall and we would sit around in the convent garden and eat things—pastry and pies, a sort of midnight picnic. It will sound strange to you that that could be innocent, but it was. All those queer societies of his started that way, however they developed. We were the Midnight Monks, and my dearest friend, Ada Lansing, was our 'prioress.' Of course, the sisters knew nothing—the sisters of the convent I mean. Poor dears! They'd have died if they had dreamt of such goings-on! And then somebody suggested that, in order that the two branches of the society should be everlastingly united there should be a wedding symbolical of our union—that and nothing more. You think all this is madly incredible, but things like that happen, and I think Bannockwaite was behind the suggestion. He had just come down from Oxford and had built the little chapel in the woods. He never lost touch with any of the societies he

formed and he was very much interested in the Monks, which was the first he invented. I know he came down because he presided at one of our summer night feasts. We drew lots as to who should be the bride——"

"And the choice fell on you?" said Lord Creith gently.

She shook her head.

"No, it fell upon Ada, and she was enthusiastic—terribly enthusiastic until the day of the wedding. It was a holiday and the seniors were allowed out in twos. Mr. Bannockwaite arranged everything. The man was to dress like a monk, with his face cowled, and the girl was to be heavily veiled. Nobody was to know the other. We weren't even supposed to know who had drawn the lots. Can you imagine anything more mad? Mr. Bannockwaite was to perform the ceremony. We went to this dear little chapel in the woods near Ascot, and in the vestry poor Ada broke down. I think it was then that I first realised how terribly serious it was. I won't make a long story of it, Daddy—I took Ada's place."

"Then you never saw your husband's face?"

She nodded.

"Yes, the cowl fell back and I saw him, and when the ceremony was over and I signed the register, I saw his name. I don't think he saw mine, unless he has been back since."

"And you never saw him again?"

She shook her head.

"No, that was the plan. I never saw him until—until he came here. I heard he was dead. It seems a terribly wicked thing to say, but I was almost glad when poor Ada died."

Lord Creith filled his pipe with a hand that shook.

"It was damnable of Bannockwaite, and even his death doesn't absolve him. It might have been worse." He put his arm around her and squeezed her gently. "And it is hard on you, Joan, but it can be remedied."

"It is harder—than you think," she said.

The Lord of Creith was a very human man, and his knowledge of humanity did not stop short at guessing.

"What is wrong, girlie?" he asked. "Do you love somebody else?"

She nodded.

"That certainly is unfortunate." The old twinkle had come back to his eyes, and he pulled her up to her feet. "Come along and have tea," he said. "Feel better?"

She kissed him. The Creiths were not demonstrative, and to be kissed by his daughter was generally a source of embarrassment to his lordship. On this particular occasion he felt like crying.

Joan went up to her room, removed the traces of tears from her face, and his lordship strolled into the library. Hamon was there with his back to the fire, his face black as a thundercloud.

"My man tells me that you took the police up to my room—why?"

"Because I am the principal magistrate in this part of the world, and I cannot refuse a request when it is made to me by a responsible officer," said Lord Creith quietly.

"I suppose you remember occasionally that this house is mine?"

"I never forget it," said the earl, "but if this county was yours it would not make the slightest difference to me, Hamon. If you were under suspicion of murder——"

"Under suspicion? What do you mean? Have you taken up that crazy story? What did the police want? Why did they search my room? What did they expect to find?"

He fired off the questions in rapid succession.

"They expected to find a burnt envelope," said Lord Creith wearily, and he got a certain malicious satisfaction when he saw his guest start. "It was a letter that was delivered to you, posted at Little Lexham this morning."

"They didn't find it," said the other harshly.

"They found the ashes thereof," said Lord Creith, and then: "Do you mind switching off wilful murder? I find I'm not so fascinated by crime as I used to be. And, by the way, Hamon, what time shall I order your chauffeur?"

"Why order my chauffeur at all?"

"Because you're going back to town to-night," said his lordship, almost jauntily. "You're constantly reminding me that this house is yours. Let me remind you that I am a tenant for

life, and that until my certain-to-be-regretted demise I have all the authority, legal and moral, to order you out of my house, which I do at this moment and in the plainest terms I can command!"

"This is a remarkable action on your part, Lord Creith," said the visitor in a milder tone.

"I don't know that it is remarkable, but it is certainly necessary," said his lordship, and, without any further conversation with his visitor, he ordered the car to be ready in an hour.

His valet brought the news to Ralph Hamon.

"We're not returning to London. Go down to the Red Lion and book me a bedroom and a sitting-room," he said.

This development had considerably altered his plans. Marborne's death and the safe recovery of the thing he had risked so much to hold, did not promise complete safety; and now that he was under suspicion, there was a double reason why he should not leave Creith until his mission was accomplished, and until he had made sure that disaster did not come from the least considered source.

Besides, he had told Ahmet to hurt but not to kill! It was no fault of his if the fool had exceeded his instructions. He had given similar orders to a certain Ali Hassan, with as unhappy consequences; but Ali Hassan was a smoker of hashish and an undependable man, or he might have carried out his orders to the letter.

Lord Creith heard that his guest had taken up his quarters at the Red Lion without feeling any sense of uneasiness.

"I don't know what the Red Lion is like nowadays," he said to his daughter. "In the days of my youth it was notoriously dirty and full of fleas, and I trust it has not changed. The air is cleaner now, my duck. This Hamon is a very nasty fellow."

And she was inclined to agree. She had not seen Jim since the meeting on the hill, and she purposely avoided contact with him. What would he think of her? How was he feeling? Was he hurt? She hoped most fervently that he was.

"Do you like Americans, Father?"

"I like some of them, and I detest some of them," said his lordship, without raising his eyes from the newspaper he was

reading; "but that remark equally applies to almost any nation. Why?" He looked over the top of the paper. "You're thinking of Morlake?" he said.

"I was," she confessed.

"A very nice fellow. I never knew that a desperado could be so nice. He is a gentleman, too," he added, and returned to his newspaper.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Letter

THE people of Creith wondered to see their lord's principal guest, and, if rumour did not lie, the future owner of the estate, moving his lodgings to the village inn; but Hamon had got to the point where he did not care what they thought. A week ago, such an affront to his dignity would have driven him desperate; but now something else was at stake. Unexpectedly his world was rocking dangerously.

He wired Lydia to meet him in London on the morrow, and, waiting until it was dark, he went out from his lodgings and bent his steps to the gardener's cottage. Mrs. Cornford opened the door to him, and at first she did not recognise him in the darkness.

"I want to see you, Mrs. Cornford," he said.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Ralph Hamon."

She did not move, standing squarely in the narrow passage, and then, opening the door wider:

"Come in," she said, and followed him into the little parlour.

"You haven't changed very much, Mrs. Cornford," he said, at a loss how to approach the subject which had brought him there.

She made no reply. It was an awkward situation, and again he sought for an opening.

"I suppose you're still feeling sore with me?"

"No," she replied quietly, and then: "Won't you sit down, Mr. Hamon?"

"There is no reason why you should feel sore. I did everything I could for Johnny."

"Where is he?" she asked.

"I don't know—dead, I suppose," he said, and at the brutality of his words she winced a little.

"I think he is dead too," she breathed, nodding slowly. "You were equally sure that he was alive twelve years ago," she said quietly. "What happened to his money, Mr. Hamon?"

"He lost it: I told you that before," said Hamon impatiently.

Her eyes never left him.

"He wrote to me from Morocco, saying that he had seen the mine, and how splendid a property it was, and then a month later he wrote from London, saying that he was fixing everything with you, and I never heard from him again."

"He disappeared: that is all I know," said Hamon. "He was coming to my office to complete the purchase of shares, and he didn't turn up. I wired you, asking where he was, immediately."

His tone was a defiance.

"I only know that he drew a hundred thousand pounds from the bank, and that neither he nor the money was seen again," she said steadily. "I am not pretending, Mr. Hamon, that my husband and I were very happy. He was of too erratic a disposition, had too many friends of both sexes that I could not possibly approve; he was a drunkard too, but he was in some respects a good man. He would not have left me a beggar as he did."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why didn't you go to the police?" he asked blandly. "If you had any doubts about me——"

She looked down upon him, a contemptuous smile upon her tired face.

"You begged me not to go to the police," she said in a low voice. "I see now what a fool I was. You begged me, for my own sake and for the sake of my husband's people, not to advertise his absence."

"Didn't I put advertisements in every newspaper? Didn't I send agents to Monte Carlo, to Aix, to Deauville—to every gambling place where he might be?" he demanded with simulated indignation. "Really, Mrs. Cornford, I don't think you're treating me quite fairly."

It was useless to reply to him. He had put her off her search until the cleverest detective agencies in England found it impossible to pick up a clue, for she had delayed independent action until that independent action was futile. One day she had been a rich woman with a home and an independent income. The next, she was beggared.

If John Cornford had been the ordinary type of business man, there would have been no question as to her action. She would have notified the police immediately of his disappearance. But Johnny Cornford, prince of good fellows to all but his own, had a habit of making these mysterious disappearances. She had learnt, in the course of her life, the discretion of silence.

"Why have you come?" she asked.

"Because I wanted to settle up this matter of Johnny. I feel responsible, to the extent that I brought him to London. Will you show me the letter he sent you from town?"

She shook her head.

"You wanted to see that before, Mr. Hamon. It is the only evidence I have that he had returned to England at all. Some time ago, a man asked you what had become of my husband, and you said that he had been lost in the desert in Morocco. Hundreds of people who knew him are under the impression that he died there."

"What is that?" he asked suddenly. There was a low wail of sound.

"I have a young man staying with me who is very ill," she said, and hurried from the room.

He looked round the apartment. Where would a woman of that sort keep her letters? Not in an accessible dining-room, he thought. Somewhere in the bedroom, probably. The door connecting the rooms was open, and he looked in. A candle was

burning on the table. He heard her footsteps and stepped back quickly to his seat.

"Now I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Mrs. Cornford. If you will let me see that letter, I will tell you the whole truth about Johnny's death."

"He is dead, then?" she asked huskily, and he nodded.

"He has been dead ten years."

She seemed to be struggling with herself. Presently she got up, went to the bedroom and closed the door behind her, returning in a few minutes with a small ebony box, which she opened.

"Here is the letter," she said. "You may read it."

Yes, it *was* blue! He knew that it was written on Critton Hotel notepaper—the Critton note was blue.

He read the scrawled writing. It was dated from a London hotel.

I am seeing Ralph Hamon to-day, and we are fixing the purchase of the shares. The only thing about which I am not certain—and this I must discover—is whether the property I saw was Hamon's mine, or a very prosperous concern which has no connection whatever with Ralph's company. Not that I think he would deceive me.

She watched him intently, ready to snatch at the letter if he attempted to pocket it, but he handed it back to her, and she replaced it in the box and closed the lid. She was about to speak when again there came that moaning sound from the next room. She hesitated a moment, locked the little ebony box and carried it back to her bedroom, turning the key on the bedroom door after her when she came out. He watched with a certain amount of amusement, and when she went into the invalid's room he followed her.

"Who is this man?" he asked, regarding curiously the gaunt face that lay on the pillows.

"He is my boarder," she said, troubled. "I'm afraid he is worse to-night."

Farringdon rose on his elbow and tried to get out of bed. It took all her strength to push him back. Again he tried to rise, and it took their united efforts to force him back.

"Will you stay here whilst I get the doctor?" she asked.

Ralph Hamon had no desire to act as nurse to a half-crazy patient, but in all the circumstances he thought it would be advisable. He pulled up a chair and watched the poor wretch who tossed from side to side, muttering and laughing in his delirium. Presently the sick man's voice grew clear.

"Joan—married? Yes, her father is Lord somebody or other," said the patient. "I never knew. You see, they found out that afternoon—the house-master heard me talking to Bannockwaite. We were married at the little church in the wood. I didn't want to marry, but the gang insisted. We drew lots. It was Bannockwaite's fault. He was never quite normal. You know Bannockwaite? He was ordained that year, and he thought it was a great joke. They chucked him out of the Church for something queer that happened, but I was abroad then and don't quite know what it was all about. Anyway, he was killed in the war. He ought never to have been a parson. Bannockwaite, I mean. He started the society, the Midnight Monks, when he was a kid at Hulston—that's my school. The girls at the convent next door used to sneak over the wall and we ate candies. . . . Joan, that was her name—Joan. Her father was Lord somebody and lived in Sussex. Bannockwaite told me that she was a peeress. I didn't want her. . . . Ban called her Ada something when we were married, but her name was Joan . . ."

Hamon listened, electrified. Joan! It must be Joan Carston. He bent over the sick man and asked eagerly:

"Where were you married?"

For a time the invalid said something that he could not catch.

"Where?" he asked sharply.

"Little church in a wood at Ascot," murmured Farringdon. "It is in the register."

Hamon knew the reputation of Bannockwaite, and guessed the rest of the story. Joan was married! He pursed his lips at

the thought. It was at once a lever and a barrier. He heard the feet of Mrs. Cornford and the doctor, and drew back to the doorway. It was easy to take his farewells now, and, with a nod to the woman which she hardly saw, he went back to the hotel.

It was half-an-hour before the doctor left, and, in spite of the feverish condition of the patient, he reported a distinct improvement.

"I'll have a nurse in from the County Hospital to-night, Mrs. Cornford," he said, and she thanked him gratefully. She had had little sleep for forty-eight hours.

Why had Ralph Hamon called, she asked herself? And what could be the object of his wanting to see that letter? He had asked years before, but she had refused him access, feeling, in some way, that its possession retained for her a last grasp on the fortune which had slipped through her hands.

She had taken a great risk in letting him touch it, and she was thankful that there were no worse consequences to her folly. Before she went to bed that night she opened the drawer of her bureau, took out the box and unlocked it. There was the faded blue letter on the top. She was closing the lid down when it occurred to her to read this last message from her husband, and she opened the sheet. It was blank.

Ralph Hamon knew the colour of the letter, knew its shape and size. It had been easy to ring the changes.

What should she do? The hour was late. Should she go to the hall and invoke Lord Creith's assistance? She had only seen him once, and she was already in his debt. And then her mind turned to Jim—that quiet, capable man, and, putting on her hat and coat, she hurried to Wold House.

There are certain advantages and some disadvantages to an hotel. The disadvantage, from Ralph Hamon's point of view, was its accessibility to the outside public. He was sitting before a fire in his bedroom, for the night was chilly, smoking his last cigar, and ruminating upon the queerness of this latest development, when, without so much as a knock, the door opened and Jim Morlake walked in.

"I've got two pieces of news for you, Hamon. The first is

that your Moor is caught. The second is that you're going to give me a letter that you stole from Mrs. Cornford, and you're going to give it to me very, very quickly."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A Yachting Trip

RALPH HAMON rose to his feet, his hands in his pockets, his jaw out-thrust.

"My Moor, as you call him, doesn't interest, and this yarn about a stolen letter doesn't even amuse me."

"I didn't come here at this hour of the night to make you laugh," said Jim. "I want that letter."

He took two strides across the room, and then, with an oath, Hamon sprang between him and the dressing-table.

"It's there, is it? Get out of my way!"

He brushed the man aside as though he were a child, and pulled open the drawer. On the top was a pocket-book, and this he took out.

"You thief!" howled Hamon, and leapt at him.

Again he reeled back from the outstretched hand.

"Here is the letter," said Jim. "Now, if——"

He did not finish his sentence. Grinning with rage, Hamon saw him make a rapid search of the pocket-book, but the thing he sought was not there.

"Found it?" he said exultantly.

"I've found the letter—that was enough," said Jim, as he slipped it into his pocket and dropped the case back into the drawer. "You can call the police if you like. I don't mind—I'm used to it. There's a fine charge for you—breaking and entering!"

Hamon said nothing.

"If your Moor talks, there will be some sad hearts on Wall

Street—nothing depreciates the stock of a Corporation more than the hanging of its president!"

Still Hamon made no reply. He flung open the window, and, leaning out, watched the tall man till he disappeared into the night, and then he went back to his interrupted reflections, but now they were on another plane. And invariably his thoughts came back to the starting point, which was Joan Carston—the married Joan. Joan, linked in some indefinable way with Jim Morlake. Lydia had told him they were engaged, and he had laughed at the idea. Was he the real barrier? If he could be sure . . . !

He left the next morning for London and went to Victoria to meet Lydia in the afternoon. She had read of the murder of Marborne in the Paris newspapers, and was a little frightened and nervous—he was amazed to note how the news had affected her.

"How did it happen, Ralph?" she asked in the car on the way home. "How dreadful! Was he really killed by a Moor? You know nothing about it, do you, Ralph?" She gripped his hand in both of hers and peered into his face. "You didn't, did you? It would be horrible if I thought otherwise. Of course you didn't!"

"You're getting hysterical, Lydia. Of course I know no more about this poor devil's death than you. It was a great shock to me. I don't pretend I liked the man, and I liked him less after he got so fresh with you."

"What are you going to do, Ralph?"

"I'm going to get away out of this country," he said. "I'm sick of it."

"To Morocco?"

He saw the corners of her mouth droop.

"Yes, to Morocco. We'll go there for Christmas: it is the best time of the year."

"Not for good?"

"Of course not. If you're bored you can run over to Gibraltar or Algeciras. You needn't stay in the place," he soothed her. "Maybe I won't go there at all. I ought to go to New York to finish off a business deal. You were telling me last week, when

you were over here, about a swell French friend of yours who was hiring a yacht to take some people to the South Sea Islands. It fell through, didn't it?"

"Yes," she said, looking at him wonderingly.

"Do you think you could go along and charter the yacht for the winter?"

"Why not go by the usual route, Ralph? It is more comfortable," she said.

"I prefer the sea."

She did not answer him, knowing that he was a bad sailor.

"Will you see what you can do in this matter?" he asked impatiently.

"Yes, Ralph. Count Lagune is in London at this moment, I think. It could easily be arranged."

She came to him in the evening with a story of accomplishment. She had chartered the yacht provisionally, and the Count had telegraphed to Cherbourg to have the vessel sent to Southampton. She found her brother in a jubilant mood, for the Moor had escaped from the little Sussex lockup to which he had been taken, and had half-killed a policeman in the process.

"Your Moor will talk!" he mimicked Jim. "Let him. I guess he's talking!"

She was staring at him, wide-eyed with horror.

"Ralph!" she gasped. "It isn't true—you knew nothing about this?"

"Of course I didn't, you fool!" he said roughly. "They thought I did. That swine Morlake practically accused me—said the man was in my service, which was a lie. I've never heard of him."

That night he wrote a letter to the Earl of Creith, and it was both conciliatory and logical.

"I must say," said his lordship, wagging his head, "this fellow isn't as bad as he looks. He has written a most charming letter, and I'm rather sorry I was such a pig."

"The only man you could talk about so offensively is Mr. Hamon," said the girl with a smile.

She took the letter from her father's hand and read it.

I'm afraid I have been rather a boor these last few days [it ran] *but so many things have happened to get on my nerves and I know I have not been quite normal. I hope you will not think too badly of me, and that in a year or two's time we shall both be amused at the absurd suggestion that I was in any way responsible for poor Marborne's death. I have been called unexpectedly to America, which has changed my plans considerably, for I had contemplated a yachting cruise in the Mediterranean and I find myself with a yacht on my hands. I wonder if I can persuade you to take the trip? You would be quite alone, and I am sure you would have an enjoyable time. I only regret that neither myself nor my sister can be with you. The yacht is the "L'Esperance," and will be at Southampton on Tuesday. May I beg of you, as a very great favour, to use the yacht as if she were yours, and save me from what, to a financier, is a misery —a sense of having wasted my money.*

"H'm!" mused the Earl. "Of course, if he'd been going on a trip, I should have written him a very polite letter, telling him that in no circumstances should I share the voyage with him. But this is different, don't you think, my love?"

Again he shook his head at the letter.

"I'm not so sure that the trip wouldn't be good for us all," he said.

Knowing how strong were her prejudices against Hamon, he expected some opposition. He was therefore agreeably surprised when she fell in with his view. Creith was on her nerves too—Creith and the sick man at Mrs. Cornford's, and Jim, whom she never saw and ached to see.

The first news of the intended trip came, as usual, ex Binger, and the divers junctions of intelligence that met in the tap-room of the Red Lion.

"It appears that this yacht—it is hon loan to Hamon."

"What do you mean by 'on loan'—has it been chartered?"

"Yes, sir. If my information is haccurate."

"Which in all likelihood it isn't—where are they going?"

"To the Mediterranean, sir. Mr. Hamon and sister are hoff to America. Which they are welcome to."

"To the Mediterranean?"

Jim looked into the bowl of his pipe thoughtfully.

"That means . . . When do they go?"

"On Saturday, sir."

"Indeed!" said Jim.

For the Mediterranean meant Tangier, and Tangier stood in his mind for Sadi Hafiz and the beautiful hell in the Rifi Hills.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The Chapel in the Wood

THERE is a little chapel which stands back from the Bagshot Road. The beauty of its outlines is hidden by the jealous trees. An open gateway in a side road leads, apparently, into the cool depths of the wood, without any suggestion that anything more solid than the pines or more beautiful than the wild violets that grow here in spring is concealed there.

Ralph Hamon left his car on the Bagshot Road and proceeded afoot to his investigations. For a time he stood looking at the graceful lines of the little edifice, though in his mind there was no thought of its æsthetic beauty or the loveliness of its surroundings. He only wondered who could have been such a fool as to build a church miles from the nearest village. He also speculated as to what the collections were, and what it cost to build the chapel, and who was the lunatic who had endowed such a useless structure.

The door was open: he went into the tiny porch and pushed gingerly at the baize door. The interior, with its gorgeous stained-glass windows and its marble altar, looked bigger than it actually was. A man was sweeping the tessellated floor, and looked round as he heard the door close.

"Good-day to you," said Ralph. "Is the vicar about?"

The cleaner shook his head.

"No, sir, there's no vicar here. The curate of St. Barnabas' generally comes over to take the service. But usually we open it for marriages—there is one to-day."

"Why for marriages?" asked Ralph, surprised.

"Because it's romantic," said the man vaguely. "You know what young people are—they like a bit of romance in their lives. It was built for a marrying church by a rich young parson named—now, what was his name?"

"Bannockwaite?" suggested Ralph.

"That's the name." The verger shook his head. "He was a bad lot, according to what I've heard."

It was a marrying church! That was good news. There would be a register. He asked the question.

"Yes, sir, the register is kept here."

He looked round dubiously toward the vestry door.

"I don't know whether I'm supposed to show it to you. You have to pay a fee, don't you?"

"I'll pay your fee, my friend. You produce your register."

He followed the man through the little arched doorway into a small stone room furnished with a table and a few chairs. His fear was that the verger would not have either the authority for or the opportunity of showing him the book, but apparently there was no difficulty here, for the man unlocked the chest and laid a heavy volume on the table.

"What date would it be?"

"It would be five or six years ago," said Hamon.

"That's as long as the church has been built," said the verger doubtfully, and turned back to the first page to verify his statement.

And the first entry on the first page was the record of a marriage between Ferdinand Charles Farringdon and Joan Mary Carston!

With fingers that trembled he made a copy of the entry, tipped the verger lavishly, and hurried out into the open. He saw a man walking unconcernedly between the pines, but, in his excitement, scarcely noticed, let alone recognised him.

How was he to use his knowledge to the best advantage?

Should he go to the girl, tell her all he knew, and threaten her with exposure? He rejected this plan. What was there to expose? Still, he had the knowledge, and sooner or later it must be of value.

He went back to town in a more cheerful mood than he had been for days. Julius Welling watched his departure, and would have followed instantly, but he was anxious to know what business had brought the financier to Ascot. . . .

Lydia was superintending her packing when her brother arrived, and she was more amiable than usual.

"You're back, Ralph?" she said. "I wanted to see you about one or two things. You can't tell how glad I am you've decided to go to America. I've always wanted to see the United States. You'll go to Palm Beach, won't you——"

"Let us get this thing right before we go any farther," said Hamon. "We are not going to America!"

Her face fell.

"We're going to Morocco."

"Morocco!" she gasped. "But, Ralph, you've made the reservations."

He sighed wearily.

"It was necessary to make reservations, because I don't want anybody to know what my plans are."

"But you have loaned the yacht to Lord Creith. You said you hated the idea of a sea voyage——"

"We're going by train—as you suggested," said Hamon. "My business calls me there, and it is absolutely necessary that I should see Sadi before Christmas."

She was silent and resentful, and stood biting her lip and regarding him from under her lowered brows.

"I don't like this, Ralph," she said. "There is something wrong."

"There is more than one thing wrong, my dear," he said. "The whole universe is a little off its feet, and I am speaking more especially of *my* universe. I'll tell you this plainly: I want Joan Carston."

She looked up at him.

"You mean you want to marry her?"

"I want to marry her if it is possible," he said carefully. "There are certain obstacles in the way for the moment, but they won't remain obstacles very long."

"But if she doesn't like you——?"

"What married couple ever like one another?" said Ralph roughly. "They are infatuated—in love, as they call it. But liking is a matter of growth and a matter of respect. And you can make a woman respect you in half-a-dozen ways. The first essential to respect is fear. Puzzle that out, my girl."

"Is it necessary that I should come?"

"Very necessary," he said promptly.

She took a cigarette from a little jewelled case and lit it, watching him keenly.

"I suppose you'll want a whole lot of help from Sadi Hafiz?" she said carelessly.

"I certainly shall."

"And you think that Sadi will be more amenable—if I am there?"

His surprise did not deceive her.

"I have never thought of it in that light," he said.

"I hate the place!" She stamped her foot angrily. "That beastly old house and dingy garden, and those wretched women prying at me from behind the grilles——"

"It is a lovely house," he interrupted enthusiastically, "and the air is like wine——" He stopped suddenly.

"You're thinking of another house," she said quickly. "Has he another?"

"I believe he has, somewhere on the hills," he answered shortly, and refused to be drawn any further on the subject.

He locked himself in his study for the rest of the day, and she thought he was working; imagined him turning out drawers, destroying papers, and clearing up the correspondence that such a man allowed to fall into arrears. But, in truth, Ralph Hamon was dreaming. He sprawled in an easy chair, his eyes fixed on vacancy, conjuring a hundred situations in which he played a leading and a flattering part. He dreamt Jim Morlake into prison and Joan into his arms. He dreamt great financial coups and the straightening out of life's tangle. And so he

passed from romance to reality, and his dreams became plans, just as Lady Joan Carston became Lady Joan Hamon.

At five o'clock he unlocked the door and lounged into his sister's room. She had a cup of tea, a novel and a cigarette, but she also had found occupation for her thoughts, and the book was unread and the cigarette was burning itself away in the jasper tray.

"You look pleased with yourself."

"I am," he said, his eyes shining, "I am!"

CHAPTER XL

The Lover

"PLEASE, sir, there's a lady to see you."

Cleaver spoke in hushed tones, and, by the air of awestricken wonder, Jim gathered somebody unusual had called.

"Who is the lady?" he asked, and knew before the man replied.

"Lady Joan."

Jim jumped up from his chair.

"Why didn't you ask her in?" he said.

"She wouldn't come in, sir. She is on the lawn: she asked if she could speak to you."

He hurried out into the garden. Joan was standing at the river bank, her hands behind her, looking down into the water, and, hearing the swish of his shoes on the grass, she turned.

"I wanted to see you," she said. "Shall we cross the river? I am on my way to the house, and you might take me as far as the coverts."

They walked in silence until they were beyond the inquisitive eyes of Cleaver.

"I left you rather abruptly on No Man's Hill," she said. "I think that it is due to you that I should finish my story."

And then she told him, in almost identical words, the story she had told her father and he listened, dumfounded.

"I am so sick of it all and I've had to make this confession twice; once to my father, because—well it was due to him, and once to you because——"

She did not finish her sentence nor did he press her.

"The marriage can be annulled, of course," he said.

She nodded.

"Father said that, and I suppose it seems very simple to you. But to me it means going into court and having this ghastly business thrashed out point by point." She shivered. "I don't think I shall ever do it," she said. "I'm a coward; did you know that?"

"I have never had that estimate of you," he laughed. "No, Joan. I don't believe that! One isn't a coward because one shirks the ugliness of life. You're going away, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"I don't want to make the trip, but I think it will be good for father. The winter climate here doesn't suit him and it will be a change for us both. I thought there was a catch in it somewhere," she half smiled, "but really Mr. Hamon is going to America. He is with father now, taking his farewells."

"And that is one of the reasons why I have the privilege of seeing you?" he chuckled, but she protested vigorously.

"No, I should have come anyway. I had to tell you about—about the marriage. And do you know, James, I have a feeling that Hamon knows."

"How could he?"

"He was at the house one night when Mr. Farringdon was unusually violent. It was the night Mrs. Cornford lost her letter, which you got back for her. And she said that Farringdon had been talking about the church in the wood at Ascot all the time. A man of Hamon's shrewdness would jump at the truth."

"Does it matter?" asked Jim quietly after a pause, "whether he knows or not? How is Farringdon, by the way?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is better. It is wicked of me not to be thankful, but,

Jim, I can't be—I shall have to call you Jim, I suppose. I saw him to-day; he was walking in the plantation at the back of the cottage."

"Is he so far recovered as that?" asked Jim in surprise, "but would he recognise you?"

She nodded.

"I have a feeling that he did," she said. "Yes, he has recovered. The doctor told Mrs. Cornford that these cases get better with surprising rapidity. I didn't know he was in the wood. I was on my way to the cottage to ask after him, and suddenly we came face to face and he looked at me very oddly as I passed. What makes me think he knows is that Mrs. Cornford told me he had been asking who was Lady Joan and what rank was her father. And then he asked how far it was to Ascot."

Her voice trembled and she bit her lip to recover her self-possession.

"He may be guessing," she said after a while, "but even that may make it more difficult for me. What am I to do, Jim? What am I to do?"

He had to hold himself in, or he would have taken her into his arms. He loved her; he had not realised how intensely until that moment. To Jim Morlake she was the beginning and end of existence and all its desirability. He would have changed the plan of his life, and abandoned the quest that had occupied ten years of his life, to save her from one heart-ache.

Looking up, she dropped her eyes again, as though she read in his face something of the burning fire that was consuming him. He laid his hand on her shoulders and his touch was a caress. Slowly they paced toward the wood, and instinctively she leaned more and more upon him, until his arm was about her and her cheek brushed the home-spun of his sleeve.

Ralph Hamon had said good-bye to the Earl of Creith and was searching the grounds for the girl when he saw the two and stopped dead. Even at that distance, there was no mistaking the athletic figure and the clean-moulded face of Jim Morlake. Still more impossible was it to misunderstand the relationship of these two.

They disappeared into the straggling plantation and he stood

for some time biting his nails, his heart hot with impotent rage. There *was* something between them, after all! He had pooh-poohed the suggestion when Lydia had made it, but here was a demonstration beyond all doubt. He broke into a run down the grassy slope toward the strip of wood, not knowing what he would do, or what he would say when he saw them. All he wanted was to meet them face to face and release upon them the fury which burnt within him.

Blundering across the grass-land, he reached the wood breathless. He stopped to listen, heard footsteps and went toward the sound. Moving forward stealthily from tree to tree, he saw the walker and stopped. It was Farringdon, the man he had seen at Mrs. Cornford's cottage!

His appearance took Hamon by surprise. He thought the walker was bedridden. The man came nearer and Hamon took cover and watched. Farringdon was a wild-looking figure with his week's growth of beard, his pale face and his untidy dress. He was talking to himself as he slouched along, and Hamon strained his ears, without being able to distinguish what he was saying. The man passed and, coming from his hiding place, the watcher followed at a distance, guessing that the course he was taking would intercept the lovers.

To Jim those were the most precious moments of his life. The burden of life had slipped from him; all other causes and ambitions were lost in his new-found happiness. In silence they walked into the wood, oblivious to all the world that lay outside their hearts. Presently she stopped and sat down on a fallen tree trunk.

"Where are we going?" she asked, and he knew that she did not refer to their immediate destination.

"We're going to happiness, sooner or later," he said, as he sat by her side and drew her to him. "We will disentangle all the knots, big and little, and straighten out all the paths, however crooked and uneven they may be."

She smiled and lifted her lips to his. And then, in that moment of pure ecstasy, Jim heard a low, chuckling laugh, and gently putting her away from him, turned.

"A forest idyll! That's a fine sight for a husband—to see his wife in another man's arms!"

Farringdon stood tensely before them, his arms folded, his dark eyes glistening feverishly. The girl sprang up with a cry of distress and clutched at Jim Morlake's arm.

"He knows!" she whispered in terror.

The man's keen ears heard the words.

"He knows . . . !" he mocked. "You bet he knows! So you're my Joan, are you? If I hadn't been a lazy brute I'd have found that out years ago."

He took off his hat with a sweep.

"Glad to met you, Mrs. Farringdon!" he said. "It is a long time since you and I were joined together in the holy bonds of matrimony. So you're my Joan! Well, I've dreamt about you for all these years, but I never dreamt anything so pretty. Do you know this . . ." he pointed at her with a shaking finger. "There was a girl I could have married, and would have married if it hadn't been for that cursed folly! You've been a stumbling block in my road, a handicap that nothing but booze could overcome!"

He took a step toward her and suddenly, gripping her, jerked her toward him.

"You're coming home," he said, and laughed.

In another instant he was thrust backward and, stumbling, fell. Jim stooped to pick him to his feet, but he struck the hand aside, and, with a scream of rage, sprang at the tall man.

"You dog!" he howled. But he was a child in the hands that held him.

"You're ill, Farringdon," said Jim gently. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Let me go! Let me go!" screamed Ferdie Farringdon. "She is my wife. I'm going to tell the village . . . she is my wife! You're coming with me, Joan Carston—do you hear! You're my wife till death do us part. And you can't divorce me without bringing him into it."

He wrenched himself from Jim's grip and staggered back. He was breathing painfully, his face, distorted with rage, was demoniacal.

"I've got something to live for now—you! You came to see me, didn't you? And he came too . . . you're coming again, Joan—alone!"

And then he spun round and, running like a person demented, flew down the woodland path and was lost to view. Jim turned to the girl. She was trying to smile at him.

"Oh, Jim!"

It hurt him to feel the quivering, trembling agony of her soul as he held her.

"I'm all right now," she said after a while. "You'll have to see me home part of the way, Jim. What am I to do? Thank God we're going away on Saturday!"

He nodded.

"And I was regretting it!" he said. "The man has been at the bottle again, or else he's gone mad."

"Do you think he will come to the house?" she asked fearfully, and then, with a surprising effort, she put him at arm's length and smiled through her unshed tears. "I told you I was a coward and I am. Matrimony doesn't suit me. Jim, I'm beginning to sympathise with wives who murder their husbands. That is a terrible thing to say, isn't it? But I am! He won't come up to the Hall—I don't care if he does," she said, with something of her old spirit. "Father knows. Who could have told him—Mr. Farringdon, I mean?"

"He guessed," said Jim decisively, "and why he hadn't guessed before, I don't know. Probably it was the accident which brought him to Creith, and the opportunity he had of seeing you and hearing your name, which made the discovery possible."

Conversation was difficult; they were each too full of their own thoughts to find speech anything but an effort. But when they came in sight of Creith House, the girl asked unexpectedly·

"Jim, what were you before you were a burglar?"

"Eh?" he replied, startled. "Before I was a burglar? Oh, I was a respectable member of society."

"But what were you? Were you in the Army?"

He shook his head.

"In any public service?"

"What makes you ask that?" he demanded, looking at her in amazement.

"I don't know—I guessed."

"I was in the diplomatic service for a while—which doesn't mean that I was an ambassador or a consul. I was a sort of hanger-on to embassies and ministries . . ."

"In Morocco?" she asked when he did not go on.

"In Morocco and Turkey and other Asiatic countries. I gave it up because—well, because I had sufficient money and because I found a new avenue to adventure."

She nodded.

"I thought it was something like that," she said. "You mustn't go any further. Will you write to me?"

He hesitated and, quick to notice such things, she said:

"Poor man! You don't know where to write! Daddy is having all his correspondence addressed to the English Club at Cadiz—will you remember that? Good-bye!"

She held out both her hands and he took them.

"I don't think you'd better kiss me again. I want to keep as near to normality as I can—I've got to face the lynx-eyed Mr. Hamon."

The lynx-eyed Mr. Hamon was watching the parting from a distance, and he ground his teeth as her companion, disregarding her wishes, put his arm about her and kissed her.

CHAPTER XLI

A Photograph

JIM MORLAKE had one predominant habit of behaviour. It was to clear up as he went along. Before the girl was out of sight he had decided on his line of action, and without hesitation turned off from the field path, and crossing the field, reached

the by-lane which led to the village, and incidentally, to Mrs. Cornford's cottage.

Farringdon must give the girl her freedom and he must disabuse that young man's mind of any queer ideas which had crept into his crazy brain.

Mrs. Cornford opened the door to him, and he saw at a glance that something out of the ordinary had happened to trouble her.

"I hope I haven't come at an inconvenient moment."

She shook her head.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Morlake," she said, and showed him into her little sitting-room.

It was not hard to guess where the trouble lay, for the sound of ravings came to him distinctly.

"I've come to the end of my dreams," she smiled, "a little suddenly."

"That is a tragic place to reach, Mrs. Cornford," said Jim. "What is wrong?"

"I was hoping to stay on at Creith, but everything depended upon my keeping Mr. Farringdon with me."

"Is he going?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Not of his own will, but I must ask him to leave. He is like a maniac to-day. A few minutes ago he came in, so beside himself that I was terrified."

Jim thought for a moment.

"I want to see him," he said, and her face grew grave.

"I wish you wouldn't," she begged. "Perhaps to-morrow, or later in the day. He has locked his door. I tried to take him a cup of tea just now, and he would not open it. I am growing frightened."

Jim felt sorry for the woman, for he had guessed that some tragedy had come to her which had altered the whole course of her life. She had the air of one who was used to good living and comfortable surroundings; and it was a pain to him to realise what this drab life must mean to her.

"Will you forgive me if I ask you what you do for a living?" he asked. "Perhaps I might be able to help you?"

She shook her head.

"Unless you wanted music lessons, I'm afraid you can't be of much assistance to me," she said, and he laughed softly.

"Music isn't my long suit," he said, "but I may be able to help you in other directions."

The raving became louder and he looked round and half-rose from the chair to which she had invited him, but she put out a restraining hand.

"Leave him alone," she said. "I will get the district nurse. I think he is ill again."

"Will you forgive me if I ask you a very personal and very impertinent question?"

She did not reply, but her eyes gave him encouragement.

"You have——" he hesitated, not knowing how to frame the question—"you have lost a great deal of money at some time or other?"

"You mean I have come down in the world?" she smiled. "Yes, I'm afraid I have. My husband disappeared some years ago and when his affairs were settled it was found that he, who I thought was a very rich man, was practically penniless. That is my whole story in the smallest compass," she said frankly. "John Cornford was rather a law to himself and did eccentric things which made tracing him a very difficult matter. Perhaps I was ill-advised at the time, for I did not attempt to make enquiries. I trusted Mr. Hamon——"

"Hamon?" he said quickly. "Was it Hamon who gave you the advice not to trace him? When did your husband disappear?"

"Nearly eleven years ago," she said.

He made a rapid mental calculation.

"In what month?"

"In May. May was the last time I heard from him. It was his last letter that you so kindly recovered from Mr. Hamon."

"May I see it?" he asked.

She brought it to him and he read it through twice.

"Your husband's name was John Cornford?"

"Why?" she asked eagerly. "Did you know him?"

He shook his head.

"No, only—years ago I had a very singular adventure. It happened a week after your husband disappeared, but it is absurd to associate the two things. Have you his portrait?"

She nodded, and went into her bedroom and was gone some time.

"I had to search for it," she apologised. "I put it away in a place of safety.

He took the photograph from her hand and he did not betray by so much as a twitching muscle the shock he received.

It was the portrait of a good-looking man of forty, clean-shaven and obviously satisfied with himself.

But it was something else: it was the face of the dying sailor whom he had picked up from the Portsmouth Road, and who, before his death, had told him the strangest story that James Morlake had ever heard.

John Cornford was the unknown sailor who slept in a nameless grave at Hindhead! For ten years he had trailed the man responsible for his death, seeking the evidence that would bring him to justice.

"Do you know him?" asked Mrs. Cornford anxiously.

He handed the portrait back to her.

"I have seen him," he said simply, and something in his tone told her the truth.

"He is dead?"

Jim nodded gravely.

"Yes, he is dead, Mrs. Cornford," and she sank down into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

Jim thought she was weeping, but presently she looked up.

"I have always felt that he was dead," she said, "but this is the first definite news I have received. Where did he die?"

"He died in England."

Again she nodded.

"I knew he had died in England. Hamon said he was lost in the desert. Can you tell me anything about it?"

"I'd rather not," said Jim reluctantly, "not just yet. Will you be patient for a little while?"

She smiled

"I've been patient for so long that I can endure for a little while longer. Please understand, Mr. Morlake, that, though this is a great shock, my husband and I were not," she hesitated, "were not very great friends. I don't think the blame is mine. I am almost ready to accept it all, though it is very difficult to analyse where the blame lies after so many years."

"Can I have that portrait?" he asked.

She handed it to him without a word.

"There is one more thing. Before your husband died, he handed me a sum of money to give to his wife——" And then, seeing the look of surprise and doubt in her face: "You will understand, Mrs. Cornford, that I did not know his name."

"You didn't know his name?" she asked in amazement. "Then how——?"

"It is too long a story to tell, but you will have to trust me."

Then suddenly she remembered Jim's antecedents and the proved charge against him.

"Was he mixed up in any—any——" She was at a loss how to put the matter politely.

"In any crooked business?" smiled Jim. "No, so far as I am concerned, he was a perfect stranger to me when I saw him. I tell you I do not even know his name."

He was gone before she began to ask herself how John Cornford could have given him a thousand pounds without telling him the name of the wife to whom it was to be delivered.

He had not left half-an-hour before Binger came to the door with an envelope. It contained ten notes for a hundred pounds, and a scrap of writing on a visiting-card.

"Please trust me," it said, and for some reason she felt no embarrassment when she locked the money away in her box.

"Did you wait?" asked Jim.

"Yes, sir, and she said there was no hanswer."

"I suppose it sounded like that," said Jim with a sigh of relief.

"Have you any plans, sir?"

"About what?"

"About the future, about going back to town. To tell you the truth, sir," said Binger, "the country don't agree with me.

The hair isn't like what it is in London. Some like country hair; personally I prefer the hair of the Barking Road."

Jim thought awhile.

"You may go back by the next train. Get me on the telephone and ask Mahmet to speak."

Telephones Mahmet under no circumstances would touch. All other conveniences of civilisation he could employ familiarly, but there was something about that forbidding machine which terrified him.

Binger left by the next train with the greatest alacrity. He was a Cockney, to whom the quiet and unsociability of the country was anathema. And Jim was not sorry to see him go, for the regularity which Binger imposed upon life was repugnant to him at the moment. Binger was the spirit of the stereotyped. He did things in a regular way at regular hours. He brought morning tea as the clock struck seven; set the bath tap running at a quarter past; at a quarter to eight Jim's shoes fell with a clatter outside his bedroom door. The Cockney valet was a constant reminder that time was flying.

Jim Morlake needed the solitude, for a new factor had appeared, a new leader from the main stream of his mystery. It was one of those coincidences which appear in every branch of investigation, that, on the day that Mrs. Cornford revealed the identity of the dead sailor, Mr. Julius Welling took hold of a thread that was to lead him to the same discovery.

CHAPTER XLII

Captain Welling: Investigator

JULIUS WELLING appeared in the record office at headquarters, and the officer on duty hurried to discover his wishes, for this white-haired man seldom made a personal call, and if he did, there was big trouble on the way for somebody or other.

"Just tell me if my memory is failing. It was ten years ago when The Black robberies started, wasn't it, Sergeant?"

A drawer was opened, a procession of cards flickered under the Sergeant's nimble fingers, and:

"Yes, sir—ten years this month."

"Good! Now give me a list of all the murders that were committed for a year before."

Another drawer shot out noiselessly.

"Shall I make a list, sir, or will you see the cards—they have a précis of the crimes."

"The cards will do."

A package of fifty large cards was put before him, and he turned them over, speaking to himself all the time.

"Adams, John, hanged; Bonfield, Charles, insane; Brasfield, Dennis, hanged—all these are 'knowns,' Sergeant."

"The unknowns are at the bottom, sir."

These Welling read without comment until he came to the last.

"Man unknown, believed murder. Assailant unknown——"

His eyes opened wide.

"Got it!" he cried exultantly, and now he read aloud.

"Man, apparently sailor, was found on the edge of the Punch Bowl, Hindhead, unconscious. Lacerated wounds and contusion of scalp. No identity established. Deceased was found by a cyclist, whose name is not available (U.S.D.I.6. (See F.O.) Foreign Intelligence Officers' Regulation, c. 970). Decreased died soon after admission to cottage hospital. All stations notified and portrait published. No identification."

Welling looked up over his glasses.

"What is U.S.D.I.6?" he asked.

"United States Diplomatic Intelligence—6 is the number of the department," said the officer promptly. "The F.O. Regulation deals with the treatment offered to Foreign Intelligence officers in this country. I was looking it up the other day, sir."

"And what is the regulation?"

"If they are acting on behalf of their Government, with the knowledge of our people, they are not to be interfered with unless there is a suspicion that they are engaged in espionage."

Captain Julius Welling rubbed his nose.

"Then it comes to this; the cyclist was an intelligence officer of a foreign Government. When he was questioned as to the identity of the dead man, I presume he produced his card to the local police inspector, and the local police inspector, in accordance with the regulations, did not put his name in the report."

"That's about what it is, sir."

"Then obviously, the person to see is the local police inspector," said Welling.

Late in the afternoon he arrived at Hindhead and interviewed the chief of police.

"The Inspector who took that report has left the service some years ago, Captain Welling," said the official. "We've got our own record, but the name of the man would not be there."

"Who was the inspector at the time?"

"Inspector Sennett. He lives at Basingstoke now. I remember the day when the sailor was found; I was acting-sergeant at the time, and was the first man to report at the hospital, but he was dead by then."

The hospital authorities gave Welling all the technical details he required, together with a description of the clothing the man had worn when he was brought into the hospital unconscious. Welling read the entry very carefully. No money was in his pocket, no books or papers of any kind to identify him.

"I think," said Welling as they left the hospital, "I should like to see the place where the body was found if you know where it is?"

"I can point to the exact spot," said the local inspector.

They entered the officer's car and drove until they came to a lonely stretch of road that bordered that deep depression which is known locally as the Devil's Punch Bowl.

"It was here," said the officer, stopping the car, and pointed to a grassy stretch by the side of the road.

Welling got down and stared for a long time at the scene of the tragedy.

"Did you personally visit this place after the man was found?" he asked.

"Yes," nodded the other.

"Was there any sign of struggle, any weapon?"

"None whatever. The impression I had at the time was that he had been brought to this place after the assault was committed and thrown on to the grass."

"Ah!" said Welling, a gleam in his eye. "That sounds to me like an intelligent hypothesis."

He scanned the countryside, beginning with the hollow and ending with the hill that sloped up from the road on the opposite side.

"Whose house is that?"

The Inspector told him; it was the property of a local doctor.

"How long has he been living there?"

"Fifteen or twenty years. He built the house himself."

Again the detective's eyes roved.

"Whose cottage is that? It seems to be empty."

"Oh, that is a little bungalow that belongs to a lawyer who died two or three years ago. It hasn't been occupied since '14."

"How long did he have it?"

"A few years."

"And before then?" asked Welling, continuing his inspection of the country.

"Before then——" The Inspector frowned in an effort to recall the name of its previous proprietor. "I know; it used to belong to a man named Hamon."

"What! Ralph Hamon?"

"Yes, he's a millionaire now. He wasn't so rich then, and he used to live here in the summer."

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Welling softly. "I'd like to see that cottage."

The path up the hillside was overgrown with weeds, though at one time it had been well kept, for it was gravelled and in places steps had been made to facilitate the owner's progress. The house bore a lifeless appearance; the windows were shuttered, spiders had spun their webs in the angles of the doorposts.

"How long did the lawyer live here, you say?"

"He never lived here. He owned the place, but I think it has been unoccupied since Mr. Hamon left—in fact I'm sure it has

Mr. Hamon sold it to him as it stood, furniture and all. . . . I'm sure of that because Mr. Steele—that was the lawyer's name—told me he intended letting it furnished."

Welling tried to pry open one of the shutters and after a while succeeded. The windows were grimed with dust and it was impossible to see the interior.

"I intend going into this cottage," said Welling and brought his stick down with a crash upon one of the window-panes.

Inserting his hand, he drew back the window-bolt and lifted the sash. There was nothing unusual about the appearance of the room. It was a simply furnished bedroom, and though dust lay thick upon every article, there was a certain neatness about the character and arrangement of the furniture which defied the dishevelling results of neglect. Nor was there anything remarkable about the other rooms. The furniture was good and the carpets, which had been rolled up, were almost new.

But the furnishing of the room did not seem to interest Welling. His attention was devoted to the walls, all of which were distempered in pink. At the back of the house was a fairly large kitchen, the windows being heavily barred.

"Would you like me to search the bureau——"

Welling shook his head.

"You will find nothing there," he said. "What I am looking for is——"

He opened the window and pushed out the shutter.

"Now I think I can find what I want," he said, and pointed. "Do you see that patch?"

"I see nothing," said the puzzled officer.

"Can't you see that a portion of the wall here has been re-painted?"

The kitchen was distempered white, and the irregular patch of new paint was distinct.

"Here is another," said Welling suddenly.

He took a knife from his pocket and began to scrape the wash carefully.

"Murder will out," he said, speaking to himself.

"Murder?" said the other in surprise.

For answer, Welling pointed to a pear-shaped stain that his knife had uncovered.

"That is blood, I think," he said simply.

With his pocket handkerchief he cleared the dust from the table and examined the top inch by inch.

"It has been scraped here. Do you feel that?"

He felt tenderly along the surface of the pine wood.

"Yes, it has been scraped."

"Do you suggest——?"

"I suggest that your unknown sailor was hammered to death in this very room," said Welling.

"But Mr. Hamon would have known."

"He probably wasn't in residence," said Welling, and his companion accepted this as completely exonerating the former owner of the bungalow.

"Naturally you wouldn't think of searching a near-by house to discover how some poor sailor had met his death," mused Welling. "I think that is all I want to know, Inspector. You had better nail up the shutters and give instructions that whoever comes to take possession must first interview me because I want this house empty for a week or two."

He came down the hill path and paced the distance between the spot where the path joined the road and the place where the dying man was found, and made a few notes.

"Now, Inspector, if you will lend me your car to go to Basingstoke, I don't think I will trouble you any further."

He found the pensioned policeman without any difficulty —he was a well-known local character—but it was less easy to induce him to talk, even to a high official of Scotland Yard —or possibly because of that, for the jealousy between the country police and police headquarters is proverbial.

But Captain Welling had a way of his own; a fund of anecdotes calculated to soften the sourest of pensioned officers with a grievance against headquarters.

"It's against all regulations," he said, mollified at last, "but I can tell you all you want to know, because I kept his card as a curio. These highbrow intelligence people had never come my way before and naturally I was interested."

The finding of the card involved an hour's search amongst such oddments as an old man, with a passion for hoarding old race cards, old dance programmes and other mementoes of a cheerful life will accumulate through the years. Watching him, Welling wondered whether the same spirit guided Ralph Hamon and whether it was just the innate craving of the miser for holding on to useless scraps of paper that conduced to the folly of keeping in his possession a document which might hang him.

"Here it is," said the pensioner in triumph and handed a stained card to his guest.

Captain Welling fixed his glasses and read:

"Major James L. Morlake, U. S. Consulate, Tangier."

He handed back the card with a beatific smile.

All the mysteries but one were solved, and that one defied solution. It was the mystery of Ralph Hamon's passion for clinging to his own death warrant.

CHAPTER XLIII

The Man in the Night

CREITH HOUSE was in that turmoil which comes to every house, big or little, when the family is on the point of leaving for a holiday. Lord Creith was looking forward to his voyage with the zest and enthusiasm of a schoolboy.

"Young people are not what they used to be," he said. "Now, when I was your age, Joan, I'd have been dancing round at the prospect of a real holiday free from bother. We shan't see Hamon for two months. That ought to be enough to make you cheerful."

"I'm bubbling over with cheer, Daddy," she said wearily, "only I'm rather tired."

If she had said she was exhausted, she would have been

nearer the truth. The events of the day had taken their toll, she realised, as she dragged herself to her room, undecided as to whether she should go to bed or try to find, in the pages of a book, the quietness of mind that was so desirable. Oscillating between the two alternatives, she took the course which was least profitable. She thought. She thought of Jim and the haggard man at the cottage, and of Hamon a little. It was curious how he had receded into the background.

Her maid came to pack her clothes, but she sent her away. How was Farringdon, she wondered? Was that outburst of his part of his disease . . . was he mad? She wished there were a telephone at the cottage, so that she could ring up Mrs. Cornford and ask her. On the spur of the moment she went to her writing-table and wrote a note, but when her maid came, in answer to her ring, she had changed her mind. She would go down to the cottage herself and see the man, reason with him, if he was in a reasonable frame of mind. She must know just where she stood.

Lord Creith saw her coming down the stairs.

"Going out?" he asked in consternation. "My dear old girl, you can't go out to-night. It is blowing great guns!"

"I'm only going to walk as far as the lodge gates, Daddy," she said.

She hated lying to him.

"I'll come with you."

"No, no, please don't. I want to be by myself."

"Can't you take your maid?" he insisted. "I don't like you roaming around alone. By gad! I haven't forgotten the fright you gave me on the night of the storm."

But, with a reassuring smile, she went out through the big doors on to the terrace and he stood uncertainly, half-inclined to follow her. She followed the drive almost to the lodge gates, then turned off by what was known as the wall path, that would bring her within a few yards of the cottage. Half a gale was blowing, and the trees creaked and groaned, and the bare branches rattled harshly above her. But she was for the moment oblivious to the elements and to any storm but that which raged in her own heart.

Mrs. Cornford had had a very uneasy evening with her patient, and the doctor, hastily summoned, now took a graver view of the disorder.

"You'll have to keep nurses here," he said. "I am afraid this man is certifiable. I'll bring in Dr. Truman from Little Lexham to-morrow to examine him."

"Do you mean he is insane?" she asked in horror.

"I am afraid so," said the doctor. "These dipsomania cases generally end that way. Has he had a shock?"

"No, nothing that I know about. He was up this morning, walking in the garden and was quite rational. Then this afternoon," she pointed to an empty whisky bottle, "I found it in the garden. I don't know how he got it, but probably he sent one of the villagers to the Red Lion."

The doctor glared at the bottle.

"That is the cause," he said. "I don't think our friend will drink again for a very long time. I would have him moved to-night, but I cannot get in touch with the hospital authorities. Hark at him!"

The patient was yelling at the top of his voice, but it was quite impossible to distinguish any consecutive sentence.

"Joan," occurred at intervals.

"That Joan is certainly on his nerves," said the doctor. "Have you any idea who she is?"

"None," said Mrs. Cornford.

In her heart of hearts she harboured a faint suspicion, which she had dismissed as being disloyal to the girl who had done so much for her.

"It may be an hallucination, but the chances are that there is a Joan somewhere in the world who could fix matters for him."

As he went out, he saw a girl on the garden path.

"Is that you, Nurse?" he asked.

"No, Doctor, it is Joan Carston."

"Lady Joan!" he gasped. "Whatever are you doing out to-night?"

"I've come to see Mrs. Cornford," said Joan.

"Well, well, you're a brave girl. I wouldn't turn out to-night for anything but dire necessity."

"How is your patient?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Very bad, very bad. Don't you go anywhere near him."

She did not answer him. Mrs. Cornford, hearing the voices, had hurried to the door and was as much surprised as the doctor to see who the visitor was.

"You must not see him," she said, shaking her head vigorously when Joan, in the privacy of the sitting-room, told her why she had come.

"But I must, I must! I must talk to him."

Her heart sank as the sound of the raving voice came to her.

"Is he so bad?" she asked in a whisper.

"He is very bad," said the puzzled Mrs. Cornford.

"You can't understand why I want to talk to him, can you?" said Joan, smiling faintly. "I see that you can't! Perhaps one day I will tell you."

She waited awhile, listening with knit brows at the animal sounds that came from the other room.

"He'll not be quiet all night," said Mrs. Cornford. "The nurses are coming at any moment now; the doctor has sent for them."

"Aren't you afraid?" asked Joan wonderingly.

Mrs. Cornford shook her head.

"No, I—I once had a case almost as bad," she said, and Joan did not ask her any more.

Her journey had been a folly and this end to it was a fitting finish.

"It was silly of me to come," she confessed, as she grasped her cloak. "No, no, don't come with me. I can find my way back to the house. And please don't even come to the door."

She went out, closing the front door behind her. To the left was a lighted window—Farringdon's bedroom. She crept nearer and could hear, and shuddered as she heard, the wild sound that came forth. Then, wrapping her cloak about her, she stole down the path.

She heard the click of the gate and stepped behind the big elm that grew before the house, not wishing to be seen. Was it the doctor? The nurse, she supposed. But it was a man's fig-

ure she saw dimly in the darkness. There was something remarkable in his gait; he was moving stealthily, noiselessly, as though he did not wish his presence to be known. She could have reached out and touched him, he passed so close. Who was he, she wondered, and waited in curiosity to discover Mrs. Cornford's visitor.

But he did not knock at the door. Instead, he moved towards the window of the sick man's room. Then she heard him fumbling with the window-latch. It was a casement window, and as he pulled it opened. The window-shade began flapping, and he lifted it with one hand, while the girl stood, frozen with horror. She could not move, she could not scream. She saw the glitter of the man's pistol, but her eyes were on the black-masked face.

"Jim!" she gasped feebly.

At that moment the intruder fired twice, and Ferdinand Farringdon screamed and rolled over on to the floor, dead.

CHAPTER XLIV

Murder

She heard a terrified cry in the house, and her first impulse was to run to Mrs. Cornford's help. But somebody else had heard the shot. There came the noise of running feet, a police whistle was blown and a man dashed through the gates and ran up the path as the door opened.

"What was that?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Cornford's agitated voice. "Something dreadful has happened. I think Mr. Farringdon has shot himself."

The girl waited, trembling with terror. What should she do? If she said that she had been a witness of the shooting, she must also describe the assailant. As the visitor disappeared

through the door, she crept to the garden gate and slipped out.

There were flying footsteps on the road. They must not see her; the presence of these strangers decided her. In another minute she was racing along the wall path. Her heel caught in a soft path and she all but fell. Before she realised what she was doing, she was running up the stairs of Creith House. Happily, there was nobody in the hall. Lord Creith, who was in his room, heard the slam of her door and came along to ask a question about his collars. He found the door locked.

"Have you gone to bed, my dear?" he called.

"Yes, Daddy," she gasped.

The room was in darkness. She staggered to the bed and flung herself upon it.

"Jim, Jim!" she sobbed in her anguish of soul. "Why did you? Why did you?"

She must have fallen asleep, for she came to consciousness to the insistent knocking on her door. It was her father's voice:

"Are you asleep, Joan?"

"Yes, Daddy. Do you want me?"

"Can you come down? Something dreadful has happened."

Her heart sank. She knew what that "something dreadful" was.

"Can I come in?"

She opened the door.

"Haven't you got a light?" he asked and was reaching for the switch but she stopped him.

"Don't put the light on, Daddy; I've got a headache. What is it, dear?"

"Farringdon has met with an accident," said Lord Creith, who lacked something in diplomacy. "In fact, he's shot. Some people think that he shot himself, but Welling is not of that opinion."

"Is Mr. Welling here?" she asked, her heart sinking.

Of a sudden she feared that shrewd old man.

"Yes, he came back from town to-night. He is downstairs. He wanted to see you."

"He wants to see me, Daddy?" she said in consternation, seized with a momentary panic.

"Yes, he tells me that you had only left Mrs. Cornford's house a few minutes before the shooting occurred."

He heard her little gasp in the dark.

"Oh, is that why?" she said softly. "I will come down."

Welling had returned to Creith that night and had had time to take his baggage to the Red Lion. He was, in fact, on his way to Wold House when he had heard the shot and the scream. The Red Lion was less than fifty yards from the gardener's cottage and the wind had been blowing in his direction.

"There is no doubt about it being murder," he explained to Lord Creith. "The window was open and no weapon has been found. The only clue I have is footprints on the garden bed outside."

"Was he dead when you found him?"

"Quite dead," replied Welling. "Shot through the heart. Two shots were fired in such rapid succession that it sounded to me like one, which means that an automatic pistol was used. You have no idea why Lady Joan went to Mrs. Cornford's?"

"I haven't. Mrs. Cornford is a great friend of hers, and probably she went down to enquire after Farringdon. She has been there before on that errand," said Lord Creith quietly and Welling nodded.

"That is what Mrs. Cornford told me," he said.

"Then why the dickens did you ask me?" demanded Lord Creith wrathfully.

"Because it is a detective's business to ask twice," said Julius at his gentlest, and his lordship apologised for his display of temper.

"Here is my daughter," he said. As Joan came into the library he shot a quick, searching glance at her. The pale face and shadowed eyes might mean anything. Mr. Welling was one of the few people who knew the secret of the church in the forest and could forgive her emotion.

"His Lordship has told you that Farringdon has been killed?" he said.

She inclined her head slowly.

"You must have been very near the house when the shot was fired. Did you hear anything?"

"Nothing."

"Or see anybody?"

She shook her head.

"Not in the garden or in the road?" persisted Welling. "Mrs. Cornford tells me that you had not left the house a minute when the shot was fired."

"I heard nothing and saw nobody," she said, and he looked thoughtfully at the carpet.

"The wind would be blowing in the opposite direction," he mused, "so it is quite possible you did not hear the shot. Is there any place in the garden where a man could conceal himself?"

"I don't know the garden well enough," she answered quickly.

"Hm!" He scratched his nose with an air of irritation. "You don't know this man Farringdon, of course?" he said, and when she did not answer, he went on: "Perhaps it is better that you didn't know him. It would save a lot of unnecessary pain to many people and your knowledge of him will not help the cause of justice."

Walking down the dark drive, he tried to piece together the puzzle which this new outrage made. Who had shot Farringdon? Who had reason to shoot him? "Find the motive and you find the criminal," is an old axiom of police work. Who had a motive for destroying that useless life? Only one person in the world—Joan Carston.

"Pshaw!" he said with a shrug. "Why not Lord Creith? His motive was certainly as obvious."

He had come back to the village singlehanded, and had to depend upon the local constabulary, represented for the moment by a sergeant of police.

Nothing had been found in the preliminary search and Welling decided to put into execution his original plan, which was to call on Jim Morlake. When he got to Wold House no light showed from any of the windows; the garden gate was wide open and that was unusual. Welling had found his way along the road by the aid of a torch and he was using this to

guide him up the drive, when he saw what were evidently fresh wheel tracks. The garage stood at the side of the house, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, he turned his steps toward this building. He came abreast of it and put the light on the garage. The doors were wide open and the little shed was empty.

Welling knew that Jim had got his car back—where was it?

Cleaver opened the door to him.

"Do you want to see Mr. Morlake?" he said. "I'm afraid he's out."

"How long has he been out?" asked Welling.

"He's been gone about half-an-hour. I was rather surprised to see him go, because he'd already made arrangements for me to call him early in the morning—Binger has gone back to town."

"Did he tell you he was going?"

Cleaver shook his head.

"No, sir, the first intimation I had was when I saw the lights of Mr. Morlake's car going through the gates. He went away in a great hurry, because he left his pipe and tobacco pouch behind and he doesn't usually do that. Not only that, but he went by the window. I hadn't any idea he was out of the house until I saw the machine."

The French window in the study was still unfastened. Pushing open the door, Welling looked carefully on the floor.

"So he went in a hurry, did he?" said Welling softly. "Went half-an-hour ago? Will you leave me, Mr. Cleaver? I want to use the telephone."

His first call was to Horsham police headquarters.

"Hold a two-seater car, painted black. The driver's name is Morlake. I want you to hold him—not arrest him, you understand, but hold him."

"What is the charge, Captain Welling?"

"Murder," said Welling laconically.

CHAPTER XLV

Wanted

JIM MORLAKE had disappeared. He had been seen neither at his flat nor at the restaurant he affected when he was in London. His car had been found outside the door of the garage where it was usually kept when in London. It was covered with mud, for the night had been wet, and showed evidence of hard driving, but there was no note nor any word of instructions as to its disposal.

Binger had not seen him, and Mahmet the Moor presented a stolid unintelligent face to the questioners who came to him, and disclaimed all knowledge of his master. The afternoon newspapers printed prominently a request to Mr. James Morlake to report himself to the nearest police station, but this produced no result.

"Always in trouble, always in trouble!" groaned Binger. "I can't understand why Mr. Morlake don't take helementary precautions."

Mahmet did not answer. If his knowledge of English was slight, his understanding of Binger's English was negligible.

"You're a man of the world, Mahmet!" continued Binger, who liked nothing better than to address an audience that could not under any circumstances protest or interrupt him, "and I'm a man of the world, Mahmet. We know young gentlemen are a bit eccentric, but this is going beyond a joke. Of course, Mr. Morlake is a foreigner, so to speak, but he's a Hanglo-Saxon, Mahmet, and Hanglo-Saxons, like you and me, don't go dodging off to nowhere without telling nobody."

That great Anglo-Saxon, Mahmet Ali, concealed a yawn politely and listened with stolid patience to a further exposition on the thoughtlessness of employers. When Mr. Binger had talked himself to a standstill, Mahmet said:

"I go way a bit."

"What you are trying to say is: 'I'm going hout,' " said Bin-

ger. "I wonder you don't try to learn the English language. I'm willing to give you an hour a day for heducational purposes."

"I go now?" said Mahmet, and Binger, in his lordly way, gave him leave.

Mahmet went to the little room where he slept, took off his white jallab and dressed himself in a ready-made European suit, which turned him from something that was picturesque to a nondescript weed. He travelled on the top of a bus eastward, and did not descend until he had reached dockland. Up a side street was a small, dingy-looking establishment that had once been a bar, which had lost its licence owing to the misguided efforts of the proprietor, who augmented his income by conducting a betting business. It was now a home, in the sense that here strange coloured folk stranded in London could buy indifferent coffee and could sleep in a cell a little bigger than an egg-box on payment of a sum which would sustain them in comfort in their own countries for a week.

Mahmet went into the smoky room which served as lounge and card-room. Half-a-dozen dusky-skinned men were playing cards, and near one of these Mahmet saw a compatriot and, beckoning to him, they retired to an empty alcove at the far end of the room.

"My good man has gone," said Mahmet without preliminary. "Will you write to your uncle in Casa Blanca and tell him to buy four mules, also that he send a message to the Shereef El Zuy at Tetuan, telling him to be with the mules near the lighthouse at El Spartel on the twelfth day of this month? You have heard no more?"

His companion, a tall, loose-made Moor, his face disfigured by the ravages of smallpox, had indeed much to tell.

"There is trouble in the Angera country, and there has been fighting. I think the Sultan's soldiers will be defeated. Sadi Hafiz is supposed to be with the Angera people, and it is true that they are making great preparations at his house in the hills. He is sending serving women there. Now that is strange, for Sadi has never taken servants to this place."

Mahmet interrupted him.

"You're an old man," he said contemptuously. "You have told me that story twice, and that is the way of old men."

There were other items of gossip to be picked up, but Mahmet did not stop either to hear the latest scandal about the Basha's favourite wife, or the peculations of the Grand Wazir. He hurried back to the flat, made a bundle of his clothes, tying his complete wardrobe in a pillow case. When Binger came the next morning there was no sign of Mahmet, and though the indignant valet made a complete inventory of the contents of the flat, he discovered, to his annoyance, that nothing was missing.

CHAPTER XLVI

Pointed Shoes

A GREAT change had come over Joan Carston in the last few days. She was the first to be sensible of the difference, and had wondered at herself. For now every remnant of the old Joan had been annihilated in the terrific shock of this supreme tragedy. She did not sleep that night, but sat at the window, her hands clasped on the broad sill, her eyes everlastingly turned in the direction of Wold House. If Jim's light would only appear! If she could hear the sound of his voice in those dark and stormy hours of night! Her heart yearned toward him. How happy she had been! She had not realised her blessings.

Daylight found her pale and hollow-eyed, an ache in her heart, depressed by a sense of utter weariness and despair. With a start she realised that she was leaving Creith that day! She could not go away now; she must wait to be at hand in case Jim wanted her. She did not judge him, for that was beyond human judgment. Nor did she attempt to analyse the condition of mind which drove him to that terrible act. She could only set the facts of the deed badly, with a numb sense of resignation to the inevitable.

There came a knock at the door. She dragged her weary limbs across the floor to turn the key. It was her maid with the morning coffee.

"Put it down," she said.

"You haven't slept in your bed, m'lady!" said the girl, aghast.

"No, I shall have plenty of time to sleep on the yacht," she said.

She drank the coffee gratefully and felt refreshed enough to go downstairs into the open. A sky grey with hurrying clouds was above her; the wind was keen and cold; pools of water stood in the little hollows of the drive. The dreary scene was in tune with her heart. Unconsciously she walked down the drive until she came to the lodge gates and stood there, her hands holding the bars, looking through—at nothing.

Then her eyes turned toward the cottage and she shuddered, and, turning, she walked quickly back the way she had come. She had not gone a few paces when somebody called her, and, looking back, she saw Welling in a dingy yellow ulster and nondescript hat pulled down over his head.

"You've been up all night too, Captain Welling?" she said. His chin was silvery with bristles, his boots thick with mud, and the hand he raised to lift his hat was inexpressibly grimy.

"I gather from that, young lady," he said, "that you've not had a great deal of sleep, and I don't blame you. The wind has been most disturbing. Is his Lordship up?"

"I don't know: I expect so. Father doesn't usually rise till nine, but I think to-day he has made some sort of arrangement with his valet to get up at the unnatural hour of eight." She smiled faintly.

"You've had your share of trouble in this village, I think," said the detective, walking at her side; but she did not make any rejoinder to that most obvious statement. "Queer case, that—very queer! Have you ever noticed that Morlake wears broad-toed shoes, the American type?"

"No, I haven't noticed anything about him," she said quickly, lest she should be an unwilling agent to his hurt.

"Well, he *does*," said Welling. "He never wears any other kind. I've been searching his house——"

"He is gone, then? The maid told me last night—he has gone?"

"Vanished," said Welling. "There is no other word, he has vanished. That is the worst of these clever fellows—when they disappear they do it thoroughly. An ordinary criminal would leave his visiting card on every mile-post."

He waited, but she did not speak, till:

"What is the significance of the broad-toed shoes?" she plucked up courage to ask.

"Well, it was a pointed toe that killed Farringdon."

At his words she spun round.

"You mean—you mean—that Jim Morlake did not kill him?" she asked unsteadily. "You mean that, Captain Welling? You are not trying to trap me into saying something about him, are you? You wouldn't do that?"

"I'm capable of doing even that," confessed Julius with a mournful shake of his head. "There is no depth of depravity to which I wouldn't sink, and that is the truth, Lady Joan. But on this particular occasion I'm being perfectly sincere. The feet under the window are the feet of a man who wears French boots with pointed toes. Also, the gun he used was of much heavier calibre than any Morlake owns. I know the whole Morlake armoury, and I'll swear he never owned the gun that threw those two bullets. Jim Morlake has three: the one he carries and two Service Colts. You seemed pretty sure it was Morlake?" he said, eyeing her intently.

"Yes, I was," and then, following her impulse: "I saw Mr. Farringdon killed."

She expected he would be staggered by this revelation, but he only guffawed.

"I know you did," he said calmly, "you were hiding behind the tree. It was easy to pick up your footmarks. You came back to the house by way of the wall path—I found the heel of one of your shoes there and guessed you were in a hurry. If you'd lost it in daylight you would have picked it up. If you'd lost it by night and had plenty of time on your hands, you'd have looked for it. Anyway, you wouldn't have lost it, if you hadn't been running at such a speed. Do you think Pointed

Toes knew you were there?—by the way, you didn't see his face?"

"How do you know?"

"Because you weren't sure whether it was Morlake or not; therefore, you couldn't have seen his face. And once more, therefore, he must have been masked. Black?"

She nodded.

"From head to foot, eh? In that style which Mr. James Morlake has made popular. I guessed that, too," he said as she nodded. "It may have been a coincidence, of course, but probably wasn't."

He stopped, and she followed his example. He was looking down at her with his head thrown back, and his eyes seemed to possess an hypnotic power.

"Now perhaps you can give me a little information that will be really useful," he said. "Who else wears pointed French boots in Creith besides your father?"

CHAPTER XLVII

The Yacht

SHE stared at him for a minute, and then burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh, Mr. Welling, for a moment you scared me. Daddy wouldn't kill anybody: it would be too much bother!"

The detective was unruffled.

"I am not suggesting that your father did shoot this man. I am merely saying that Lord Creith is the only man within ten miles who wears pointed shoes."

"How silly!" she scoffed. "Why, lots of people wear pointed shoes. Mr. Hamon wears pointed——"

She checked herself suddenly.

"That is what I wanted to know," said Julius gently, "that

is all I wanted to know! Does Mr. Hamon wear pointed shoes? I know Lord Creith does, because I've interviewed the village cobbler, and the village cobbler knows the secret history of every pair of boots in your house."

"Mr. Hamon is so rich that he doesn't need to have his shoes repaired," said the girl, and then, seriously: "You don't suspect Mr. Hamon? He wasn't in Creith last night."

"If he shot Farringdon, then he certainly was in Creith. If he didn't shoot Farringdon, I don't care where he was," said Welling.

The reaction after that night of terror and anxiety was so great that she felt hysterical. She could have flung her arms round the neck of this interesting old man and hugged him in her joy and relief.

"Are you sure—absolutely sure?"

"About Morlake?" he asked, sensing the cause of her anxiety. "I don't think there is any doubt about that. He is one of those big-hoofed fellows. He could not have got his feet into the shoes that left the marks. Though," he added cautiously, "it is by no means certain that the owner of the shoes was also the murderer. What makes it look so queer against Morlake is that Pointed Shoes was in the grounds of Wold House last night. We've got a cast of his feet leading toward the river, and at the bottom of the river it is any odds on finding the pistol with which the crime was committed."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"What is more," he went on, "I guess we're going to get a letter from some person unknown, telling us exactly where to look for that gun. I love anonymous letters, especially when I'm expecting 'em. The letter will be in printed characters and will be posted"—he looked up to the dull sky and considered—"will be posted . . . now where will it be posted? Yes, I have it," he said brightly. "It will be posted at the G. P. O."

"You're a prophet," she smiled.

"I'm a student," he replied.

When they got to the house, Lord Creith was superintending the labelling of the baggage, which meant that every package had been labelled wrongly.

"Hullo, Welling!" he said. "Who have you arrested this morning?"

"I never arrest people on Saturdays: it spoils their week-end," said Welling. "You've had a telephone message from Mr. Hamon?"

"Yes," said the Earl in surprise. "How do you know?"

"It came last night, didn't it?"

"About midnight. How on earth do you know that? If the exchange was in the village I could quite understand, but my calls are put through from Lexham."

"It was about something he'd left behind, asking you to forward it?"

"No. As a matter of fact, he wanted to know what time I would be leaving this morning."

"Why, of course," nodded Welling, "that was the natural thing to do. About twelve o'clock?"

"A little before, I should imagine. You've been listening in," accused Lord Creith.

When he went away to discover the whereabouts of a sporting rifle which had mysteriously disappeared at the last moment, Joan asked:

"How do you know all this, Captain Welling?"

"I guessed," said the old man. "It is natural that, if Pointed Toes was friend Hamon, he should seize the earliest opportunity of establishing the fact that he was in town." He shook his head sadly. "Telephonic alibis are terribly numerous," he said.

Her mind was occupied by one pressing thought, and after a while she expressed the question that was in her mind.

"Why did Mr. Morlake go away?" she asked.

She had asked Welling to breakfast with them, which meant breakfasting with her, for the choler of Lord Creith was rising rapidly. Some fishing rods had joined the rifle, and his favourite tennis racquet had suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth.

"I don't know," said Welling helplessly. "That fellow is beyond the understanding of normal people. Something is wrong

—I don't know where, I don't know how. But all I know is that he's left in a hurry."

"You don't think . . . ?" she asked quickly, and he smiled at her.

"These fellows are in danger and out of danger all the time," he said carelessly. "Probably he is carrying out some quiet little burglary——"

"Don't be horrid, Captain Welling," she said hotly. "You know Mr. Morlake is not a burglar."

"If there is one thing I know," said Welling, "it is that he *is* a burglar! I don't care what noble incentive he has, but that doesn't make him less a burglar. What is more, he is the cleverest safe-breaker in this country."

"Has he stolen much money?" she asked.

"Thousands, but it has all been Hamon's. That is the rum thing about this burglar, although it isn't so rum to me as it was. He's broken into other safes and other boxes, but not one of the people who have suffered from his curiosity have complained that they lost money. Hamon has complained about nothing else. And the crowning queerness of his action is that it isn't money he is after."

If she was hoping, as she was, for a miracle to happen and for Jim to reappear at the last moment, she was doomed to disappointment. The car which took her and her father to Southampton passed Wold House, and she craned out of the window in the hope that she might catch one glimpse of him. When the machine had passed the entrance she looked back through the window of the hood.

"Expecting anybody, dear?" asked Lord Creith drily. "Missed anything?"

"Yes, Daddy, I have," she said, with some spirit.

"You can buy almost anything you want at Cadiz," said His Lordship, wilfully dense. "Cadiz is my favourite city. Unfortunately, it is rather late for the bull fights."

"I never dreamt you were so bloodthirsty, Father," she said.

"Bulls' blood, yes, but human blood, no," he said with a shiver. "By gad, I'm glad to be out of Creith! I was scared that

they'd hold me for a witness. Happily, I was drinking the waters of Lethe in the presence of the impeccable Peters when the murder was committed. In fact, I heard the shot through the window."

"The waters of Lethe" was Lord Creith's synonym for his normal whisky and soda.

The first emotion which Joan experienced when she saw the yacht lying out in Southampton Water was one of pleasurable surprise. She had expected to see a very small ship, and, when she had time to think about such matters, had felt a little uneasy at the prospect of a voyage across the Bay of Biscay in a tiny craft. *L'Esperance* had the appearance of a small cruiser, and was unusually large even for an ocean-going yacht: the same idea seemed to strike Lord Creith.

"That must have cost friend Hamon a pretty penny," he said. "Why, the infernal thing is as big as a liner!"

The captain, an Englishman, welcomed them at the gangway, and apparently every preparation had been made to leave as soon as the party was on board.

"Mr. Hamon is not coming, I understand?" said Captain Green, a typical teak-faced sailorman. "If you like, my Lord, we'll get under way. There is a moderate sea in the Channel, and with any kind of luck we ought to get through the Bay without so much as a roll."

"Let her go, Captain," said Lord Creith gaily.

The girl's cabin was beautifully appointed and smothered with hothouse flowers. She did not trouble to ask who had sent them. Mr. Hamon would not lose an opportunity of emphasising his devotion. She was too fond of flowers to throw them out of the porthole, but the knowledge that he had sent them robbed them of at least one attraction.

Lord Creith and she dined alone that evening. The captain was on the bridge, for they were steaming down the crowded Channel, and fog banks were reported by wireless between Portland Bill and Brest.

"A jolly good dinner," said his lordship with satisfaction. "You've got an excellent cook, Steward."

"Yes, sir," said the chief steward, a Frenchman who spoke

English much better than his lordship spoke French, "we have two."

"All the crew are French, I suppose, as this is a French yacht?"

The steward shook his head.

"No, my Lord," he said, "most of the hands are English and Scottish. The owner of the yacht prefers an English crew. We have a few Frenchmen on board—in fact, we've almost every nationality, including a man who I think is either a Turk or a Moor. He came on board at the last moment to work in the pantry, and he's been ill ever since we came out of the Solent. I believe he is a servant of the owner's; we are dropping him at Casablanca."

He served the coffee, and Lord Creith took a gulp and made a wry face.

"I praised your dinner too soon, Steward," he said good-humouredly. "That coffee is execrable."

The steward snatched up the cup and disappeared into the mysterious regions at the back of the saloon. When he returned, it was with apologies.

"The chef will send you in some more coffee, my Lord We've got a new assistant cook who isn't quite up to his job."

After dinner, Joan strolled on to the deck. It was a calm night, with a sea that was absolutely still. Through the mist she could see the stars twinkling overhead, and on the starboard beam a bright light flickered at irregular intervals.

"That is Portland Bill," explained one of the officers who had come down from the bridge, "and the last of the lights of England you'll see until you return."

"Will it be foggy?" she asked, looking ahead.

"Not very. I think you're going to have an ideal voyage for this time of the year. If we can get abreast of Cherbourg without slackening speed, we shall be quit of the fog for good."

She stood, leaning over the taffrail, talking to the officer, until Lord Creith joined her, smoking a long cigar and at peace with the world. He brought with him an acceptable coat, which she was glad to put on, for the night was very cold—a fact she had not noticed until she came on deck.

They stood side by side, her father and she, watching in silence the faint phosphorescence of the waters; and then:

"Happy, old girl?"

"Very happy, Daddy."

"Whom were you sighing about just now?"

He heard her low laugh, and grinned to himself in the darkness.

"I didn't know that I was sighing. I was thinking about Jim Morlake."

"A very nice fellow," said his lordship heartily. "An American, but a very nice fellow. I don't want a burglar in the family—naturally. But I'd just as soon have a burglar as a money-lender. In fact, I should prefer one. I don't know whether that is particularly generous to our beloved host, but there is something in the sea air that makes me candid."

The days that followed were, for Joan, days of almost perfect peace. The yacht was a delightful sea boat; the comfort and luxury of the appointments, and a glimpse of a scarcely remembered sun, added to her happiness. If, by some miracle . . . the waving of a magic wand, or the muttering of some potent incantation, she could have brought Jim into that deep, red-cushioned armchair—Jim, in white flannels, Jim, with his classical face and a patch of grey at his temples. . . . She sighed.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Mutiny

THE voyage passed without event until the morning of the day they reached Cadiz. Something aroused Joan from deepest sleep to most complete wakefulness. There was no sound but the sough of wind and sea, and the peculiar monotony of the "creak-creak" at intervals which is a ship's own noise. The grey light showed against the porthole and faintly illuminated the cabin. Sitting up in bed, she looked around.

A movement by the door attracted her attention; it was slowly closing, and, jumping to the floor, she ran and pulled it open. She caught a glimpse of a big figure disappearing in the gloom of the alleyway, and then a strange thing happened. He had almost reached the end of this narrow passage when something rose from under his feet and tripped him. Even amidst the sea noises she heard the thud as he struck the hard deck. He was on his feet in an instant and then, for some reason, he fell again. Straining her eyes, Joan saw a man stand over him and pull him upright. In another instant they were out of sight.

She locked her door and went back to bed, but not to sleep. It may have been an accident; it may have been that one of the crew was a thief—few crews, even a yacht's crew, but may include one of those pests of the sea. Perhaps the thief had been detected by a watchful quartermaster, and that was the explanation of the little fight she had witnessed. She did not wish to worry her father, but as soon as she was up and dressed, she went in search of the chief steward and reported what had happened. He was genuinely concerned.

"I don't know who it could have been, Miss. The watch were on deck, scrubbing down, at daybreak, and there's a night steward on duty in the alleyway. What was the man like?"

"As far as I could see, he wore a white singlet and a pair of blue trousers."

"Was he tall or short?"

"He was very big," she said, and the man passed the crew under review.

"I'll speak to the chief officer," he said.

"I don't want to make any trouble."

"Your Ladyship will probably make more trouble if you don't report this," he retorted.

Lord Creith, who generally found the most comfortable explanation, suggested that she had been dreaming—a suggestion which she indignantly rejected.

"Then, my dear," he said, "probably the *man* was walking in his sleep! You should have locked your cabin door."

She spent two full and delightful days at Cadiz, that city of

languid, beautiful women and unshaven men; drove out to Jerez to see the wine pressed, and learnt—though she had a dim idea that she had already learnt this at school—that Jerez had been corrupted into English as "sherry" and had given its name to a wine. The bad weather had passed; the sky was a delightful blue, and if the wind that blew down from the sierras had a nip that made the men of Cadiz wear their high-collared blue cloaks, it was to the girl a tonic and a stimulant.

They left Cadiz at midnight on the third day, and at daybreak the stopping of the engines woke her. She heard the rattle of a hawser and splash as the anchor fell into the water, and, looking out of her porthole, saw a twinkle of lights near at hand. It was her first glimpse of Africa, and the mystery and wonder of it thrilled her. In daylight, much of the enchantment was gone. She saw a straggle of white houses fringing a lemon-coloured beach; beyond, the blue of hills. In the cold, cheerless light of morning the mystery had gone. She shivered.

The stewardess came in answer to her ring of the bell.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"At Suba, a little coast village."

At that moment a lowered boat came into view through the porthole and disappeared. She heard the splash of it as it struck the water.

"The crew are going ashore to bring out some cases of curios that Mr. Hamon wishes to be brought home," explained the stewardess, and through the porthole Joan watched the boat draw away.

Lord Creith knocked at the door at that moment and came in in his dressing-gown.

"This is Suba," he explained unnecessarily. "Put your coat on and come up on deck, Joan."

She slipped into her fur coat and followed him up the companion-way. Except for one sailor, the deck was deserted. On the bridge was a solitary officer, leaning over the bridge and regarding the retreating boat without interest.

"There aren't many people left on the ship," she said, glancing round.

Lord Creith looked up at the clouds with a nautical eye.

"A man and a boy could navigate this ship on a day like this," he said. "There is no wind."

And then, looking across to the port side, he saw a tall, white, billowing sail moving slowly toward them.

"There is wind enough," she smiled. "Aren't they coming rather close?"

"Bless you no!" said his lordship cheerfully. "These fellows can handle a boat better than any Europeans. Moors are born seamen, and by the cut of his sail I should think it is a Moorish craft. This coast is the home of the Barbary pirates."

She glanced nervously round at the approaching sail, but he went on, oblivious to the impression he was creating.

"For hundreds of years they levied a tax on every ship that passed. Why, the word 'tariff' comes from Tarifa, a little village on the other side of the Straits——"

He stopped as the girl turned quickly. They had both heard that deep "oh!" of pain.

"What was that?" asked Lord Creith. "It sounded like somebody hurt."

There was nobody in sight, and he went forward to the bridge. As he did so, a big man crept up the companion ladder, and Joan immediately recognised the figure she had seen in the alleyway. Barefooted, the man approached the unconscious officer leaning over the taffrail.

"Look out!" yelled Lord Creith.

The officer spun round and the blow just missed his head, but caught him on the shoulder and he fell with a cry of pain. In another instant the big man had turned, and the girl saw with horror that in his hand he carried a huge hammer.

That diversion saved the officer's life. Injured as he was, he thrust himself forward and tobogganed down the steep ladder, falling on to the deck. In an instant he was on his feet and climbed down the companion-way, the big, white-faced Moor in pursuit.

"Down the companion, quick!" cried Lord Creith, and she obeyed.

As she flew down the ladder, she saw over her shoulder the high white sail of the dhow rising sheer above the ship's side, and heard the jabber of excited, guttural voices.

"Run along the alleyway into my cabin," cried Lord Creith.

She sat panting on the sofa, whilst her father shot the bolt in the door. He opened his bag and made a search.

"My revolver is gone," he said.

"What is wrong?" she asked. She was calm now.

"It looks precious like mutiny," said his lordship grimly.

She heard a patter of feet on the deck above, and again a babble of talk.

"They've boarded us from the dhow," said her father quietly, and the sound of somebody swearing softly came to them from the next cabin.

"Is anybody there?" Lord Creith called.

The partition dividing the cabins did not extend to the upper deck, and a space of three or four inches made conversation possible. It was the wounded officer, they discovered. No bones were broken, he told them, but he was in considerable pain.

"Have you any kind of firearm on your side?" he asked anxiously.

Lord Creith had to confess sadly that he was unarmed.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," was the reply. "Most of the crew are ashore. The Captain and the first and second officers have gone to collect some packing-cases."

"How many of the crew are left on the ship?"

There was a silence as the officer calculated, and then:

"Six, including the steward. One deckhand, two chefs and a cook's mate, and, of course, the Moor we took on at Southampton. He is the fellow who bowled me over. I think they must have got the deckhands, and the chef wouldn't fight. That leaves us with the cook's mate."

He laughed bitterly.

"And the cook's mate is going to have a bad time," he said after a pause. "He beat up the Moor a few days ago. I only heard about it in the early watch. You remember your daughter complained—she is with you, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Lord Creith. "Was it the Moor who opened the door?"

"That's the man. I suppose he was looking for loose guns," said the officer. "The cook's mate happened to be on duty and saw the fellow, and there was trouble! And there's worse trouble ahead—here they come."

There was a patter of bare feet in the alleyway, and somebody hammered on the cabin door.

"You come out, you not be hurt, mister," said a husky voice.

Lord Creith made no reply.

Crash! The door shivered under the blow, but it was obvious that the narrow alleyway did not give sufficient play to the hammer, for the lock remained intact. Again the blow fell, and a long crack appeared in one of the panels of the door.

Lord Creith looked round helplessly.

"There is no kind of weapon here," he said in a slow voice to the girl. "Even my wretched razor is a safety!"

He looked at the porthole.

"Do you think you could squeeze through that?"

She shook her head.

"I won't leave you, Daddy," she said, and he patted her shoulder.

"I don't think you could get through," he said, eyeing the porthole dubiously.

Crack! Bang! The panel broke, but it was not the sound of its smashing they heard. Outside in the alleyway there was a quick scurry of feet, a shot was fired, and another. Then, from the other end of the alleyway came three shots in quick succession. Somebody fell heavily against the wall with a hideous howl, and then there was a momentary silence.

"What was that?"

It was the officer's voice from the next cabin.

"I think it was somebody shooting," said Lord Creith. He peered through the splintered panel. The man on the floor was still howling dismally, but there was no other sound.

"Look, Daddy," cried the girl excitedly. "The boat is returning."

She pointed through the porthole, and over her shoulder he saw the two boats rowing furiously toward the yacht.

And now the alleyway pandemonium broke out. Again came the rush of feet and the deafening staccato of the automatic.

"Who is it? It must be one of the deckhands. Where did he get his gun?"

The questions were fired across the top of the partition, but Lord Creith was too intent upon the struggle outside. The firing had ceased, but the screaming fury of the fighters went on. Presently there was an exultant yell and somebody was dragged along the alleyway.

"They've got him," said Lord Creith, a little hoarsely. "I wonder who he is."

Then, as the leader of the mob came parallel with the door, a voice hailed them in English.

"Don't open your door until the crew come aboard. They are returning."

The girl stood petrified at the sound of the voice, and pushing her father aside she stooped to peer through the broken panel. She saw a man struggling in the hands of his white-robed captors; a tall man in the soiled white garb of a cook. It was Jim Morlake!

CHAPTER XLIX

The Man on the Beach

JOAN screamed and tugged at the door.

"The key, the key, Father!" she said wildly. "It is Jim!"

But he dragged her back.

"My dear, you're not going to help Jim Morlake or yourself by putting yourself in the hands of these beasts," he said, and presently her struggles ceased and she hung heavily in his arms.

He laid her on the settee and ran to the porthole. The boats

were nearing the yacht, and he could see, by the attitude of the Captain, who stood in the stern, revolver in hand, that news of the mutiny had reached him. There was no noise from the alleyway nor overhead on the deck; only the whining of the wounded man outside the door broke the complete stillness. In another minute they heard the boats bump against the side of the ship, and the rattle of booted feet above them. And then came the Captain's voice.

"Is anybody here?" he called.

Lord Creith unlocked the cabin door and stepped out over the prostrate figure.

"Thank God you're safe!" said Captain Green fervently. "The young lady, is she all right?"

Joan had recovered, and though she lay without movement she was conscious. Then realising that she alone knew the secret of the "cook's" identity, she staggered to her feet.

"Jim! They have taken Jim!" she said wildly.

"Your cook." Lord Creith supplied the startling information.

"My cook!"" said the puzzled captain, and then a light dawned on him. "You mean the assistant cook—the man I took on at Southampton? Is he the fellow who did this?" He looked down at the motionless figure in the alleyway. "If they have taken him, he is on the dhow," said the Captain. "It pushed off as we came on board."

He ran up to the deck, and the girl did her best to imitate his alacrity, but her limbs were shaking and she was curiously weak. The dhow was already a dozen yards from the ship, and was heeling over under the fresh land breeze, her big leg-o'-mutton sail filling.

"Are you sure they've taken him on board?" asked the Captain. "He may be amongst the——" He did not finish the sentence.

One of the crew was dead, another so badly injured that his life was despaired of, and search parties were sent to discover other casualties, but no sign of Jim was reported.

"We can overtake them," said Lord Creith, and the Captain nodded.

"I'll get up anchor, but it is by no means certain we can do much unless they are fools enough to keep to the open sea. I think they'll run round the point, and there I shan't be able to follow them, except with boat crews."

The dhow was gaining way every minute. The white wake at her stern was significant.

The wireless operator, in his little cabin on the upper deck, had been overlooked by the boarders, and it was he who had signalled the Captain back. He had done something more: he had got in touch with an American destroyer that was cruising some twenty miles away, and a blur of smoke showed on the horizon.

"Whether she can come up before the dhow gets to safety is a question," said the Captain.

At that moment the white-sailed vessel changed her course, and the Captain grunted.

"She is going inshore round the point. I thought she would," he said.

"What will they do with him?" asked the girl, and for a moment he did not know to whom she referred.

"Oh, the cook? I don't suppose he'll come to much harm. If they thought he was a man of substance they would hold him to ransom. As it is, he'll probably be fairly well treated. The Moor isn't particularly vindictive to the enemies he takes in fair fight."

The wind had freshened and was blowing strongly when the yacht's bow turned in pursuit of the Moorish craft, but by this time he was rounding the promontory that ran out to sea for two miles, and by his tactics the Captain guessed what plan was being followed.

"We shall never get up to them," he said, "and if we do, we shan't find the man we want."

"Why?" asked Joan, but he did not supply the gruesome information.

In his days he had been a member of the Royal Navy, engaged in the suppression of slave traffic on the East Coast of Africa, and he had seen slaves dropped overboard, with a bar of iron about their necks, in order that the incriminating evi-

dence against the captors should be removed. And he did not doubt that the skipper of the dhow would follow the same procedure.

When they rounded the point, the dhow was so close inshore that it seemed to have grounded.

"They're landing," said Captain Green, watching the boat through his glasses, "and there goes my cook!"

The girl almost snatched the binoculars from him and focussed them on the beach. Her hand trembled so violently that all she saw was a blur of white figures and yellow sand, but presently she mastered her emotion and held the glasses upon the tall, dark form that walked leisurely up the beach.

"That is he," she whispered. "Oh, Jim, Jim!"

"Do you know him?"

She nodded.

"Then there is no need for me to pretend ignorance," said the Captain, "and I will ask you to keep this matter from my owners. Captain Morlake and I are old acquaintances. I knew him when he was at Tangier. He came to me in a great hurry on the Friday night before we sailed, and begged me to ship him on board the yacht as an extra hand. Knowing that he has always been mixed up in queer adventures—he was an intelligence officer, and may be still, for all I know—I took him on as a cook. He warned me of what would happen, and, like a fool, I thought he was romancing."

"He warned you of this attack?" said Lord Creith in astonishment. "How could he know?"

The Captain shook his head.

"That I can't tell you, but he did know, though I imagine he wasn't sure where the attempt would be made, because he said nothing before I went ashore to pick up those darned packing-cases—which were not there!"

The destroyer was now visible to the naked eye.

"She is useless to us," said the Captain, shaking his head. "Before she can land a party, these fellows will be well away into the desert." He bit his lip thoughtfully. "They won't hurt Captain Morlake. He speaks the language, and there is hardly a big man in Morocco who doesn't know him. I should im-

agine that at this moment the captain of the dhow is scared to death to find who is his prisoner."

He focussed his glasses again.

"Two Europeans!" he gasped. "What other man have they taken? Do you know, Johnson?" He turned to his second officer.

"I've been looking at him and I can't make him out," he said.

He steadied his telescope against a stanchion and looked again.

"He is certainly a European, and he is certainly not a sailor. He is wearing a civilian overcoat."

"May I look?"

Assisted by the officer, the girl brought the telescope to bear upon the figure that was walking with a white-gowned Moor. Jim had disappeared over the crest of a sandhill, and these two walked alone, the Moor gesticulating, the other emphasising some point with his clenched fist.

She shook her head.

"I don't know him," she said. "I never expected I would."

It was a humiliating confession for her to make, did she but know it, for she had once boasted that she would know Ralph Hamon anywhere and in any garb! And it was Ralph Hamon who strode angrily side by side with the master of the dhow.

CHAPTER L

The Play

RALPH HAMON, shivering in his light suit, despite the heavy overcoat he wore, growled his imprecations as he toiled painfully up the steep slope of the sandhill and Arabic is a language which was specially designed for cursing.

"You're a fool!" he stormed. "Did I not tell you a hundred times what to do?"

The black-bearded captain of the dhow shrugged his shoulders.

"It was the fault of my officer, who now roasts in hell, for I told him first to silence all the members of the crew that were left on board, but they forgot this sailor with a pistol."

"Why didn't you knock him on the head? Why did you bring him on board?" growled Hamon.

"Because the men desired to settle with him in their own way. He has killed Yussef, whom the men loved. I think he will be sorry he did not die," said the Captain ominously, and Ralph Hamon snorted.

"What he will be sorry for and what he will be happy about doesn't concern me," he growled. "You had the woman in your hands and you did not take her."

"If this sailor with a pistol——" began the Captain again, and Ralph Hamon shouted him down.

"Curse the sailor with a pistol!" he shouted. "Do you think I've been lying ill in your foul boat for two days in order to capture a sailor?"

"If you will see him——" pleaded the Moor.

"I don't want to see him, and I don't want him to see me. If you allowed the woman to escape, you are fools enough to let him go also. And do you think I want him to carry the news to Tangier that I was with you on your dhow? Do what you like with him."

He saw the prisoner at a distance—a tall man whose face was unrecognisable under the mask of grime and blood, but he did not venture near to him. Mules were waiting for them at a little village and at the sight of one, more richly caparisoned than the rest, with a saddle of soft red leather, and tinkling bells about its neck, Ralph Hamon bit his lip until the blood came. It was the palfrey that he had designed for the girl.

With no delay the party mounted and soon a string of a dozen mules was crossing the wild land. They halted for two hours in the afternoon and resumed the journey, halting for the night in the vicinity of a little village of charcoal burners.

"You will not come to the play?" said the Captain inter-

rogatively. "This man is of your race and it would give you unhappiness to see them whip him."

"It would not make me unhappy at all," said Ralph savagely, "but I'm tired."

They pitched a tent for him next to the chief, and he was on the point of retiring, though the sun had scarcely touched the western horizon, when a diversion came. There was an excited stir amongst the men of the caravan; the drone of conversation rose to a higher pitch and he enquired the cause.

"El Zafouri," was the laconic answer.

Ralph knew the name of this insurgent chief, though he had never met him.

"Is he here?"

"He is coming," said the other indifferently, "but I am a good friend of his and there is nothing to fear."

A cloud of dust on the hill-road was evidence of the size and importance of El Zafouri's retinue; and when, half-an-hour later, he pitched his camp near by, Ralph Hamon was glad in his heart that the rebel was likely to prove a friend.

He went in person to greet the notorious shereef, and found him sitting before his tent, a squat and burly man, distinctly negroid of countenance, and black.

"Peace on your house, Zafouri!" he said conventionally.

"And on you peace," said Zafouri, looking up straightly at the stranger. "I think I know you. You are Hamon."

"That is my name," said Ralph, gratified that his fame had extended so far.

"You are a friend of the Shereef Sadi Hafiz?"

Here Ralph Hamon was on more delicate ground. So rapidly did Sadi change his friendships and his allegiances that, for all he knew, he might at the moment be a deadly enemy of the man who was watching him.

"Sadi is my agent," he said carefully, "but who knows whether he is my man now? For Sadi is a man who serves the sun that shines."

He was perfectly safe in saying this, for the reputation of Sadi Hafiz was common property and he was secretly relieved to see the twinkle that came in Zafouri's dark eyes.

"That is true," he said. "Where are you going, *haj?*" He addressed the captain of the dhow, who had stood by Ralph during the interview.

"To the Rifi Hills, Shereef," he said and the little Moor stroked his chin.

"You are coming the longest way," he said significantly. "You have a prisoner?"

The dhow captain nodded.

"My men told me of him. He dies, they say? Well, that is best for him and for all. When a man is asleep he harms nobody and is happy. I will come to your play."

Ralph would have been present, but nature forbade the exertion. For forty-eight hours he had been without sleep, and no sooner had he lain on the matting that his servant had spread for him in the tent, than he was asleep.

The play had been fixed for an hour after sunset, and it was of a kind that was novel to Zafouri. Two lines of men arranged themselves at a few paces' interval, leaving a narrow lane through which the prisoner was to pass, ostensibly to safety, for, if he reached the end of the lane and was sufficiently agile to escape the two swordsmen placed there to give him his quietus, he was free. It was the old, bad punishment of running the gauntlet, and Jim, who in his experience had heard of this method of settling accounts with malefactors and political enemies, faced the certainty that, swift as he might run, he could not hope to survive the hail of blows which would fall on him, for each man in the two lines was armed with a wooden stave.

His captors brought him fruit and water.

"Be swift and you will be happy," said one with a chuckle, and was taken aback when Jim answered in the Moorish Arabic quoting a familiar tag.

"Justice is faster than birds and more terrible than lions."

"Oh!" said his gaoler in surprise. "You speak the language of God! Now, friend, speak well for me to the djinn, for tonight you will live amongst ghosts!"

They brought him out for the final condemnation and the dhow captain, squatting in state on a silken carpet, gave judgment

"Death for Death. Who kills shall be killed," he recited in a monotonous sing-song.

"Remember that, man," said Jim sternly, and Zafouri, who shared the silken carpet with his host, shot a quick glance at the bearded prisoner.

They brought the Captain a glass of water and he ceremoniously washed his hands of the prisoner.

"Listen, man without a name," said Jim in fluent Arabic. "If I die, people will talk and the consequence will come to you wherever you are, and you will hand in the *sok,* and your soul will go down to Gehenna and meet my soul——"

"Take him away," said the Captain huskily.

"Let him stay."

It was Zafouri who spoke.

"Peace on you, Milaka." It was the old Moorish name for him and Jim's eyes kindled.

"And on you peace, Zafouri," said Jim, recognising the man.

And then Zafouri drew his squat bulk erect, and, putting his arms about the prisoner, kissed him on the shoulder.

"If any man says death to my friend, let him say it now," he said, and his left hand closed over the hilt of his curved sword.

The Captain did not speak.

CHAPTER LI

The Courtyard

TANGIER lay bathed in the early morning sunlight, a vast mosaic of white and green, and Joan Carston gazed spellbound at the beauty of the city as the yacht moved slowly into the bay. Overhead was a cloudless blue sky; and a shore wind brought in its lap a faint, pungent and yet indescribable aroma.

"That is the East," sniffed Lord Creith.

Joan had thrown off the effects of her terrible experience,

but the change which Lord Creith had noticed in her before they had left England was more marked than ever.

"Do you feel equal to going ashore?"

She nodded.

"You're a wonderful girl, Joan," he said admiringly. "You have had more knock-down blows in the past few weeks than come to most people in the course of their lives."

She laughed.

"You can become inured even to knock-down blows. I think it would take a human earthquake to disturb me now."

He shot a furtive glance in her direction.

"You're not worrying any more about—about Morlake?"

She seemed to be examining her own mind before she replied.

"It is difficult to tell how I feel. I have such faith in him and this feeling—that if anything terrible had happened I should know."

Lord Creith was only too happy to agree. He had a weakness for agreeing to all cheerful, and for dissenting violently from all dismal, predictions.

"The Captain says he has arranged to stay here a week and I think we can well afford the time."

He had booked rooms at the big white hotel that overlooked the beach and, later in the day, from the broad terrace, she could gaze in wonder at the confused jumble of buildings, which made modern Tangier.

"Rather like the Old Testament lit by electricity," said his lordship. "I don't know whether I've read that or whether I've invented it. If I've invented it, it is jolly good. I hope you're not being disappointed, Joan. These Eastern cities are never quite so pleasant near at hand as they are from three miles out at sea. And the smell—phew!" He dabbed his nose with his handkerchief and pulled an unpleasant face.

"Jim lived here for years," she said.

"Even that doesn't make it smell like Attar of Roses," said her practical father. "What was he doing here?"

"Captain Green says he was in the diplomatic service. I am going to enquire."

The next day she threaded the tortuous street in which the various consulates were situated. The news she secured about Jim Morlake was, however, of the most fragmentary character. By very reason of his profession, the officials at the consulates and embassies were reticent. She was, however, able to confirm the Captain's statement, which had been news to her, that for some years Jim Morlake had been something of a power in this city. Lord Creith knew the British Minister and they went to tea at the Residency and Joan listened without hearing to the talk of concessions, of representations, of the enormities of the sanitary council and the hideous injustice which was inflicted by the native *basha* upon the unfortunate subjects of the Sultan.

She did not accompany her father in his visit to the prison and she was glad afterwards, when he brought back a highly coloured narrative of his experience.

"A hell upon earth," he described it tersely, and she felt a little sinking of heart. If the method of the *Kasbah* was the standard of the Moorish treatment of prisoners, then it would go hard with Jim.

It was the third day of their visit and already Joan had almost wearied of the town. She had seen the great market-place, and wandered amidst the charcoal sellers and the kneeling camels, had watched the native jugglers and the professional holy men, and chaffered with the sellers of brass in the bazaar.

"The prettiest part of Tangier one doesn't see. Do you remember that ugly street we passed through at the back of the mosque?" she asked. "A very old door opened and I caught a glimpse of the most gorgeous garden and there were two veiled women on a balcony, feeding the pigeons. It was so lovely a picture that I nearly went in."

Lord Creith said something about the insanitary conditions of the houses and went on to discuss the hotel bill. That afternoon, they walked up the hill to see a gun play. A number of tribesmen had come in from the hills to celebrate the anniversary of a local saint's death and at her request he turned aside from the market place to show her the exterior of the prison.

She shuddered as a horrible face leered out at her from behind the bars.

"Do you want to have a look inside?"

"No thank you, Daddy," she said hastily, and they turned their steps toward the bazaar.

Lord Creith opened his lawn umbrella and put it up, for the sun's rays were unpleasantly hot.

"East is East and West is West," he chanted. "What always interests me about these fellows is, what are they thinking about? You don't really get into the East until you understand its psychology."

The girl, who had been walking behind him, did not answer, but he was used to that.

"Now, if you were to ask me——" he began and turned his head to emphasise his remarks.

Joan was not there!

He strode back along the street. A begging man stood at the corner of a court, demanding alms in the name of Allah; a stout veiled woman was waddling away from him carrying a basket of native work; but there was no sign of Joan. He looked up at the high walls on either side, as though he expected to find her perched miraculously on the top.

And then the seriousness of possibilities struck him and he ran along the uneven cobbled street to the end. He looked left and right, but there was no sign of Joan. In one street he saw four men carrying a wooden case, chanting as they went, and he came back to the beggar and was about to ask him if he had seen a lady, when he saw that the man had been blinded.

"Joan!" he roared.

There was no answer. A man who was asleep in the shadow of a doorway woke with a start, stared at the pallid old man, then, cursing all foreigners who disturb the rest of the faithful, curled up and went to sleep again.

Lord Creith saw in the distance a French officer of gendarmes and ran up to him.

"Have you seen a European lady—my daughter——?" he began incoherently.

Rapidly he told the story of the girl's disappearance.

"Probably she has gone into one of the houses. Have you any Moorish friends?" asked the officer.

"None," said Lord Creith emphatically.

"Where was she when you saw her last?" and Lord Creith pointed.

"There is a short cut to the *sok* near here," suggested the officer and led the way.

But Joan was not in the big market place and Lord Creith hurried back to the hotel. The lady had not returned, the manager told him. She was not on the terrace. The only person on the terrace was a tall man in grey, who was fanning himself gently with his broad-brimmed sombrero.

He looked round at the sound of Lord Creith's voice and jumping to his feet, hurried toward him.

"Morlake!" gasped Creith. "Joan . . . !"

"What has happened to her?" asked Jim quickly.

"She has disappeared! My God, I'm afraid—I'm afraid!"

CHAPTER LII

The House of Sadi

JIM had a brief consultation with the chief of police before Lord Creith guided him to the spot where Joan had disappeared.

"I thought it was here!"

He said something in a low voice to the police chief and Lord Creith saw the officer shake his head and heard him say:

"I can't help you there. It may lead to serious trouble for me. The only thing I can do is to be on hand if you want me."

"That will do," said Jim.

There was a small door in the wall and to this he went and knocked. After a time the wicket opened and a black face appeared in the opening.

"The Shereef is not in the house," said the slave in guttural accents.

Jim looked round. The police officer had withdrawn to a discreet distance.

"Open the door, my rose of Sharon," he breathed. "I am from the *basha,* with news for the Shereef."

The woman hesitated and shook her head.

"I must not open," she said, but there was an indecision in her tone of which Jim took immediate advantage.

"This message is from Hamon," he said in a low voice. "Go to the Shereef and tell him."

The wicket closed. Jim glanced round at the troubled Lord Creith.

"You had better join our friend," he said under his breath.

"But if she is there, I can insist——"

Jim shook his head.

"The only form of insistence is the one I shall employ," he said grimly. "You would help me greatly, Lord Creith, if you did not interfere."

Soon after his lordship had walked reluctantly to the unhappy police chief, Jim heard the sound of bolts being drawn, a key squeaked in the rusty lock, and the gate was opened a few inches to admit him to a familiar quadrangle. He glanced at the ancient fountain, and the untidy verandah and its faded chairs, and then, as a man appeared in the doorway, he walked swiftly across the untidy space and went up the steps of the verandah in one bound.

"Sadi Hafiz, I want you," he said, and at the sound of his voice the man started back.

"God of Gods!" he gasped. "I did not know that you were in Tangier, Milaka!"

It seemed that his pale face had gone a shade whiter.

"Now what can I do for you, my dear Captain Morlake?" he said in his excellent English. "Really this is a surprise—a pleasant surprise. Why did you not send your name——"

"Because you would not have admitted me," said Jim. "Where is Lady Joan Carston?"

The man's face was a blank.

"Lady Joan Carston? I don't seem to remember that name," he said. "Is she a lady at the British Embassy?"

"Where is the girl who was lured into this place half-an-hour ago?" asked Jim. "And I warn you, Sadi Hafiz, that I will not leave this house without her."

"As God lives," protested the fat man vigorously, "I do not know the lady and I have not seen her. Why should she be here, in my poor house, for she is evidently of the English nobility."

"Where is Lady Joan Carston?" asked Jim deliberately. "By God, you had better answer me, Sadi, or there will be a dead man for me to explain."

He jerked his gun from his pocket, and the gleam of it seemed to blind the Moor, for he half closed his eyes and blinked.

"This is an outrage," he said, and, as he grew more and more excited, his English suffered. "I will report this matter to the Consulate——"

Jim pushed him aside and strode into the flagged hall. A door was on the left; he kicked it open. It was evidently Sadi's smoking-room, for it reeked with a scent of hashish and tobacco. At one end was an iron circular staircase leading to an upper floor, an incongruous object in that primitive Oriental setting. Without hesitation he flew up the stairs, and, with a scream, a girl who was lolling on a lounge jumped up and pulled her veil across her face.

"Where is the English lady?" asked Jim quickly.

"Lord," said the trembling girl, "I have seen no English woman."

"Who else is here?"

He ran across the half-darkened room, pulling aside the curtains of its three sleeping places, but Joan was not there. He came down the stairs to confront the outraged Sadi Hafiz.

Jim knew what was going to happen before Sadi fired, for he had committed the unpardonable sin of invading the women's apartments of an Oriental magnate.

"Drop your gun, Sadi," he said sternly, "or you die. I've got you covered."

Sadi fired at the place where Jim had disappeared, and then,

unexpectedly, the intruder came into view from behind a pillar, and Sadi put up his hands. In another instant Jim was upon him and had snatched his pistol away.

"Now," he said, breathing through his nose. "Where is Joan Carston?"

"I tell you I don't know."

Outside the door was a small knot of frightened servants, and Jim slammed the heavy open doors into their place and shot the bars.

"Where is Joan Carston?'

"She's gone," said the man sullenly.

"You lie. She hasn't had time to go."

"She was here only for a minute, then she went into the Street of the School—there is another door in the yard."

"With whom?"

"I don't know," was the defiant reply.

Jim towered over him, his hands on his hips, his eyes scarcely visible.

"Sadi," he said softly, "do you know Zafouri? Last night he told me that he will have your head because you betrayed him to the Government, took money from him to buy rifles, and used it for yourself. I will save your life."

"I have been threatened before, Mr. Morlake," said Sadi Hafiz, recovering a little of his audacity, "and what has happened? I am still alive. I tell you I know nothing about this lady."

"You told me just now she was in the courtyard and had been taken out of the door into the Street of the Schools. Who took her?"

"As Allah lives, I do not know," cried the man in Arabic, and Jim struck him across the face with the back of his hand.

"You will keep, Sadi Hafiz."

Jim turned as he unbarred the doors and flung them open, and he pointed to his throat with a long forefinger.

"Zafouri will get you—that is certain. But more certain than that is, that, if any harm comes to this lady, I will find you and kill you inch by inch."

He slammed the doors behind him and strode out of the house and into the courtyard.

A brief examination showed him that the man had spoken the truth to this extent, that there was another door leading to the narrow street which Lord Creith had searched.

And then he remembered that Joan's father had seen four men carrying a heavy case. He strode into the street and beckoned the policeman.

"I want your people to trace four men who were carrying a heavy case up the Street of The Schools. They must have crossed the *sok*."

The movements of the party were easy to follow. A native policeman had seen them crossing to the Fez Road and load the case upon a light car which had been waiting there all the morning. A camel driver, who had been resting by the side of the road near the car, confirmed this, and said that something inside the box had moved, and he had asked the man in charge of the carrying party what it was, and had been told it was a crate of chickens.

"Wait here," said Jim.

He ran back through the crowd that had gathered in the market, and disappeared in their midst. Ten minutes later Lord Creith saw a big car come flying along the road, and Jim was at the wheel.

"I found it outside the Hotel d'Angleterre," he said breathlessly. "God knows who is the owner."

Lord Creith jumped into the car.

"I'm afraid I can't come with you," said the police officer, who was a Frenchman and regarded all regulations as inelastic. "Beyond here is outside my jurisdiction."

Jim nodded curtly and sent the car flying along the Fez Road. The tracks of the motor-van were visible for a long way, but ten miles out of Tangier . . .

"There's the car!" said Jim.

It was abandoned by the side of the road, and the case was still intact. Suppose he were wrong, and they were on the wrong track? His heart grew heavy at the thought.

He pulled the car up at the tail of the trolley and leapt on to

the float. And then he saw that the box was empty, the lid having been thrown into the undergrowth on the side of the road.

Not wholly empty, for in the bottom lay a little white shoe, and, as he lifted it out, Lord Creith groaned.

"That was Joan's," he said.

CHAPTER LIII

The House in the Hollow

JOAN CARSTON was sauntering behind her father, and had come opposite to the door in the wall, when it opened and she paused to look into the courtyard. The first view was disappointing, but the smiling black woman who held the door invitingly open pointed, as though it was something worth seeing, and Joan, her curiosity aroused, stepped through the doorway. Instantly the door was slammed behind her, a big, black hand covered her mouth, and she was drawn backward against the gate-woman, who whispered something fiercely in her ear. It was unintelligible, but there was no mistaking the threat.

Before she realised what had happened, four men, who had appeared from nowhere, closed on her, and a scarf was knotted tightly round her ankles, a great wad of cottonwool was thrust into her face, blinding and stifling her, and she felt herself lifted up from her feet.

She struggled, kicking furiously, but it was futile to struggle against those odds, and, her terror subsiding, she lay passive on the stone-flagged ground whilst her hands were bound tightly together. Then she was lifted and she sniffed the scent of clean wood. The wool was pulled from her face and another silken scarf bound tightly round her mouth by an expressionless negro, who pulled the edges of the scarf away so that she could breathe. In another minute the lid of the case was fastened on, and she was lifted irregularly into the air. She dared not struggle for fear of throwing the bearers off their balance.

The air in the box was stifling: she felt she would suffocate and tried to raise the lid with her head, but it had been fastened from the outside. For an eternity she seemed to be swaying dizzily on the shoulders of the bearers, and then there was a little bump, and the box was slid on to a flat surface. What it was she knew, for she could feel the throb and pulsation of the engine beneath her. The car moved on, gathering speed, and evidently the driver was in a hurry, for he did not slow even over the irregular country road. Soon she was aching in every limb and ready to swoon.

She must have lost consciousness for a while, for she woke suddenly to find herself lying on the side of the road. The trolley and the box had disappeared, and her four captors, whose heads were swathed in scarves, were looking down at her. Presently one stooped and lifted her to her feet, saying something in Arabic which she did not understand. She shook her head to signify her ignorance of the language, and then she saw the waiting mules. Carrying her in his arms, the big negro sat the girl on a mule, and led it down a steep slope at right angles to the road, his companions following.

Her head was in a whirl, she was feeling dizzy and sick. To add to her torment, her thirst was almost unbearable, but they had not far to go. She saw one of the men, evidently the leader, looking back anxiously, and wondered what he feared. If there was a pursuit she must be rescued, and her heart leapt at the thought. The end of her journey, however, was near at hand. In a hollow was a low-roofed house, surrounded by a high, white wall, through the low gate of which the man led her mule.

The courtyard was a blaze of autumnal flowers; the inevitable fountain played in the centre. She waited while they closed the gates, and then her attendant signalled her to dismount, and leading the way to the house, knocked at the door. It was opened immediately, and he pushed her into the hall. At first it was so dark that she could see nothing and then there developed from the darkness the figure of a Moorish woman. She was pretty, Joan thought, in spite of the unhealthy pallor of her complexion. Guided by the girl she passed through another door into a long room, the floor of which was covered

with shabby rugs, which, with a divan, constituted its furnishing.

Light was admitted from windows set high up in the wall, and she recognised the place, from the descriptions she had read, as the harem of a Moorish house. No other woman was in the room, and the girl who had conducted her there disappeared almost immediately, closing the door behind her.

Joan sat down on the edge of the settee and dropped her face in her hands. She must face the danger bravely, she told herself, terrible as that danger was. She had no illusions as to what these two attempts on her liberty signified. The first had failed, but now she realised, as she had suspected all along, that the attack upon the yacht at Suba had been designed for her capture, and was not, as the Captain had asserted and Lord Creith had believed, the haphazard attack of pirates in search of treasure.

The abduction had been carried out so smoothly that it must have been planned. How did they knew she would pass that door? They must have been waiting for days to carry their plot into execution. And who were "they"?

Her head ached; she felt at the end of her resources; and then she sprang up as the door opened and a girl came in, bearing a large brass tray containing native bread, fruit, and a large brown carafe of water. With this was a chipped cup.

"Do you speak English?" asked Joan.

The girl shook her head. The prisoner tried in French, with no better result.

"I can speak Spanish a little," said the Moorish girl, but though Joan recognised the language, her knowledge was too slight to carry on a conversation.

When she had gone, Joan poured out a cupful of water and drank feverishly. She regarded the food with an air of suspicion, and then resolutely broke the bread and ate a little.

"Joan Carston," she said, shaking her head, "you're in a very unhappy situation. You have been kidnapped by Moors! That sounds as though you're dreaming, because those things do not happen outside of books. You're not dreaming, Joan Carston. And you may eat the food. I don't suppose they will try to poi-

son you—yet! And if they do, perhaps it will be better for you."

"I doubt it," said a voice behind her, and she turned with a cry.

A man had come into the room from the far end, and had been watching her for a long time before he made his presence known.

"You!" she said.

Ralph Hamon smiled crookedly.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said.

The appearance of the man momentarily stunned her, and then there dawned slowly upon her the true meaning of his appearance.

"So it was you all the time?" she said slowly. "And that was why you sent us on this voyage? You were the other man, on the beach? I ought to have known that. Where is Jim Morlake?"

She saw his jaw drop.

"Jim Morlake? What are you talking about? He is in England, I suppose, under arrest for murder, if there is any justice in the country. You probably know that your husband was killed the night before you left, and that Morlake shot him."

She shook her head, and he was amazed to see her smile.

"You killed Farringdon," she said. "Captain Welling told me before I left. Not in so many words, but he found your footprints on the garden bed."

If she wished to frighten him, she had succeeded. That old look she had seen before came into his grey face.

"You're trying to scare me," he said huskily.

"Where is Jim Morlake?" she asked again.

"I don't know, I tell you. Dead, I hope, the damned Yankee crook!"

"He is not dead, unless you killed him when you found you had him in your hands."

His blank astonishment was eloquent.

"In my hands? I don't understand you. When was he in my hands?"

"He was the sailor you took from the yacht," she said; "the cook."

"Hell!" breathed Hamon, and took a step backward. "You're fooling me. That wasn't Morlake. It was a sailor—a cook."

She nodded.

"It was Mr. Morlake. What did you do to him?"

"Damn him!" he snarled. "That swine Zafouri took him away——" He stopped and changed his tone. "He is dead," he said. "He was executed by the crew of the dhow——"

"You're not telling the truth. You told it at first. Mr. Morlake got away!"

He did not speak. Fingering his quivering lips, he glared at her.

"Morlake here! He can't be here: it is impossible!" he said. "You've invented that, Joan. I thought he was miles away. And what did Welling say? That is an invention too. What reason had I to shoot that soak?"

"Captain Welling practically told me that you were the murderer," said the girl with calm malice.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his streaming forehead.

"I'm a murderer, eh?" he said dully. "Well, they can only hang me, whatever I do," and his glance fell upon her. "I was going to tell you something, but you've upset my programme, Joan. It is easy to find out whether Morlake is in Tangier."

"I didn't say he was in Tangier. I don't know that he is," she said, and for a second his face cleared.

"He will come to Tangier," he said, frowning again. "He is not likely to lose much time if he knows you're there. Bit keen on him, aren't you? Lovers! I saw him kissing you in the wood. I hope he taught you how. Most of you cold white women haven't learnt the trick."

He bit his lip, and evidently his mind was elsewhere than in that tawdry room.

"I'll soon find out if he is in Tangier," he said, and went out the way he had come, through the little door behind the curtain which she had overlooked.

A few minutes after he had gone, the Moorish girl returned, and led her to a room at the back of the house. A brick bath had been sunk in the floor, and the girl signalled to her to undress. Thrown across the back of a rickety chair, Joan saw some garments which she guessed were the costume of a Moorish woman, and at first she refused, but the girl pointed significantly at the door; and guessing that if she offered any resistance force would be applied, Joan undressed under the watchful eye of the girl and stepped down into the bath.

When she came out and was enveloped in the warm towel that the girl had put for her, she saw that her clothes had been moved.

"You want me to wear these?" she asked in lame Spanish.

"Si, señorita," said the Moorish girl, and Joan dressed herself slowly.

The costume was curiously unlike any she had seen (and had worn) at amateur theatricals. There was no tinsel, no glitter of sequins . . . her first feeling was one of comfort. Only one article of her old attire she was allowed to retain—her stockings. Fortunately, she had not far to walk, for she had lost her shoe, and though the stocking sole was brown with the dust of the Fez Road, it was not worn through. When she had finished, the girl led her back to the room where she had first been imprisoned, and left her there.

It was growing dark when Ralph Hamon returned to her.

"Your unofficial fiancé is in trouble with the Moorish authorities," he said, "but he asked for it! A man with his knowledge of the country should have thought twice before attempting to raid the women's apartments of a Moorish noble. You will be interested to learn that he was the gentleman who trailed you this afternoon."

"Anything you tell me about him interests me," she said, and his scowl rewarded her.

"I think you'd better get into a new frame of mind, Joan, and readjust your values," he said. "Big changes are coming into your life and into mine."

He seated himself beside her on the settee and she edged away from him, and finally rose.

"I'm going to enjoy the existence that I've always wanted," he said. "The *dolce far niente* of Morocco is a real thing: in Italy it is a phrase."

"You don't imagine that you are beyond the reach of the law?" she asked.

"The law!" he scoffed. "There is no law in the hills, but the law of the rifle and the chieftain who happens to be reigning in that particular district. Don't you realise that there is a man in this country called Raisuli, who has been the law in his own province for twenty years? My dear Joan," he said blandly, "no country is going to war in order to save you from a little inconvenience. I am probably rendering you a very great service," he went on. "You are going to know life—the life that is worth the living."

"In what capacity?" she asked, looking at him gravely.

"As my wife," he replied. "There will be some difficulty about marrying for a year or two, but Moorish marriages are arranged much more easily. You shall learn Arabic: I will be your teacher, and we will read the poems of Hafiz together. You will look back pityingly upon the old Joan Carston, and wonder what attractions she found in life that were comparable with the happiness——"

"You talk quite well," she interrupted him. "Nobody would guess that a man of your age, and with your curious face, would ever speak of poetry."

She looked down at him, her hands clasped behind her, an obvious interest in her eyes.

"You *are* a remarkable man," she said emphatically. "I don't know how many murders you have committed, but you have certainly committed one; and probably the whole of your fortune is founded upon some horrible crime of that description. It doesn't seem possible, does it, that we have that type of person living in the twentieth century? And yet there must be—oh, a whole lot of people who have committed undetected murders for their own profit."

He was speechless with fear and rage. This, to him, was the tremendous fact—that she was presenting him as he was, and as now, for the first time, he knew he was. For a man may lie

to himself and screen his own actions from himself; so veil his motives, and the sordidness of those motives, that, when they are faithfully described, he stands aghast at the revelation.

"I am not a murderer," he croaked, his face working convulsively, "I'm not a murderer, do you hear? I—I am many things, but I'm not a murderer."

"Who killed Ferdie Farringdon?" she asked quietly, and he screwed up his eyes with an expression of pain.

"I don't know—I did, perhaps. I didn't mean to kill him . . . I meant to—I don't know what I meant. I thought I'd get Morlake. I drove my machine to within three miles of the village and came the rest of the journey on foot."

He covered his eyes with his arm as though shutting out some horrible sight.

"Damn you, how dare you say these things?" he nearly sobbed in his rage. "I'll make you so interested in yourself that you won't talk about me, Joan, understand that!"

He was about to say something else, but changed his mind, and, turning, walked quickly out of the room. She did not see him again that night, but just as she was dozing on the divan, she heard the door open and sitting up, saw the Moorish girl carrying a long blue cloak over her arm. Without a word she put it about Joan's shoulders, and she knew that the second stage of her journey had begun.

Whither would it lead? In her faith that it would lead to Jim Morlake, she went out, impatient to resume the journey.

CHAPTER LIV

A Visit to the Basha

HAMON had spoken no more than the truth when he had said that Jim was in serious trouble with the authorities. But it was that kind of serious trouble which he could handle. The *basha* of Tangier, governor and overlord of the faithful, was at cof-

fee when Jim was announced by the great man's majordomo. The *basha* pulled his beard and frowned horribly.

"Tell the Excellency that I cannot see him. There has been a complaint by the Shereef Sadi Hafiz which must go before the Consulate Board to-morrow."

The servant disappeared, to return almost immediately.

"Lord," he said, "Morlaki sends you one word and waits your answer."

"You're a fool," said the *basha* angrily. "I tell you I will not see him. What is the word?"

"The word, Lord, is 'sugar.' "

It was an innocent enough word, but the official's hand came straight to his beard and plucked at it nervously.

"Bring him to me," he said after a while, and Jim came into the presence unabashed.

"Peace on your house, Tewfik Pasha!" he said.

"And on you peace!" gabbled the other, and, with a wave of his hand, dismissed the servant from the room. "Now I tell you, Excellency, that there is serious trouble in Tangier. The Shereef Sadi Hafiz has brought charges against you of breaking into"—he lowered his voice fearfully—"his harem."

"O la la!" said Jim contemptuously. "Do I come here to talk of harems, Tewfik? I come here to talk sugar—great cases of sugar that came to you in the spring of the year of the rising, and in those cases of sugar were rifles, which went out to the pretender."

"God give you grace!" groaned the *basha.* "What can I do? If Sadi makes a complaint I must listen to him, or my authority is gone. As to the sugar——"

"We will not talk about sugar," said Jim, sitting down on a cushion in front of the *basha's* divan. "We will talk about a lady who has been taken from this town through the agency of Sadi Hafiz."

"If you can prove this——"

"What proof is there in Tangier?" said Jim scornfully. "Where you may buy a thousand witnesses for ten pesetas on either side! You know Sadi, Tewfik: he has been your enemy——"

"He has also been my friend," said Tewfik uneasily.

"He is your enemy now. A week ago he sent word to the Sultan that you had been plotting with the Spaniards to sell a railway concession."

"May he die!" exploded the *basha*. "I did no more than give a feast to a distinguished Spanish Excellency——"

Again Jim stopped him.

"This much I tell you, that you may know how you stand with Sadi. Now give me authority to deal with him."

The *basha* hesitated.

"He is a very powerful man, and the Angera people are friends of his. They say that he is also a friend of Raisuli, though I doubt this, for Raisuli has no friends. If I do not take action——"

"How can you take action if Sadi Hafiz is in prison?" asked Jim quietly, and the *basha* jumped.

"Prison? Bismallah! Could I put a man of his importance in the *kasbah?* You're mad, Morlake! What crime?"

"Find me a crime at the right moment," said Jim. He took from his pocket a thick bundle of thousand-peseta notes and threw them into the lap of the governor of Tangier, "God give you peace!" he said as he rose.

"And may he give you many happy dreams!" replied the *basha* mechanically, as he touched the notes lovingly.

Jim went back to the hotel and saw Lord Creith, and for once that nobleman did not object to being bothered.

"It is going to be difficult to search the houses where she may be hidden," said Jim. "I've got into bad trouble already. The only searches we can make are purely unauthorised. Of one thing I'm certain—that they have not gone along the Fez Road. I've gone twenty miles beyond the place where we found the trolley, and nobody had seen such a party. They must be in the vicinity, and to-night I am going out to conduct my investigations alone."

He was impatient to be gone, the more so as Lord Creith expressed a desire to accompany him. The old man went up to his room to get an authority he had procured that afternoon from the international consulates, and whilst he was waiting Jim

stepped out on to the balcony. The night was chill, but a full moon rode serenely in the unclouded heavens, and he stood spellbound for a moment by the beauty of the scene. The broad terrace was deserted except for one man who sat with his coat collar turned about his ears, his feet raised to the stone parapet.

American or English, thought Jim. Nobody else would be mad enough to risk the ills which are supposed to attend the night air.

The stranger was smoking a cigar, and Jim sniffed its fragrance and found it good, but Creith appeared at that moment with the authorisation.

"I'm afraid it is not going to help you much, Morlake," he said, "but in such places as acknowledge the Sultan you will find it of assistance with the local authorities." He held out his hand. "Good luck to you!" he said simply. "Bring back my girl—I want her, and I think you want her too."

Jim pressed the hand of the old man in his, his heart too full for words. Dropping his hand on Creith's shoulder, he nodded, and then gently pushed him through the glass door into the lobby of the hotel. He needed solitude at that moment.

He stood for a moment, his eyes on the old man, as, with bowed shoulders, he walked up the carpeted corridor; then, turning abruptly, Jim made for the steps that led to the Beach Road. He was on the point of descending when a voice hailed him:

"Hi!"

It was the smoker of cigars. Thinking that he had made a mistake, he was going on.

"Hi! Come here, Morlake!"

Astounded, he turned, and went toward the lounger.

"As you know me well enough to call me by name, I feel no diffidence in telling you that I'm in a great hurry," he said.

"I suppose you are," drawled the man on the seat, crossing his legs comfortably. "What I want to know is this: have you seen anything of my friend Hamon?"

Jim stooped to get a better view of the man's face. It was Captain Welling!

CHAPTER LV

The Lady from Lisbon

"WHAT on earth are you doing here?"

"Inviting an attack of rheumatism," grunted Welling. "You're in a hurry: anything wrong?"

"Lady Joan has disappeared," said Jim, and briefly told as much of the story of the girl's abduction as he knew.

The old man listened thoughtfully.

"That is bad," he said. "I heard there'd been a shindy in the town, but didn't get the hang of it. My Spanish is very rusty, and my Arabic is nil. Not that Arabic is ever necessary to a traveller in Morocco," he said. "Lady Joan. By gosh, that's bad! Where are you off to?"

"I'm going to look for her," said Jim briefly.

"I won't stop you. No sign of Hamon?"

Jim shook his head.

"He is in Morocco, of course. You know that? I trailed him down as far as Cadiz. He came across on the *Peleago* to Gibraltar. There I missed him. He flitted from Gibraltar, leaving no trace."

The news took Jim's breath away. He had not seen Hamon on the dhow or subsequently, and he made a quick calculation.

"He may have got here," he said, "but I haven't seen him. I've gone on the supposition that Sadi Hafiz has been responsible for all the arrangements made to date, but it is quite possible that Hamon is somewhere in the background, putting in the fine touches."

He was turning away when a thought struck him.

"I wish you'd go in and see Lord Creith. He is rather under the weather. He will be able to tell you what happened at Suba," and, with a hasty word of farewell, he ran down the steps and hurried toward the gates of the city.

Near the Street of the Mosque is a small and unpretentious

house, the door of which is reached by a flight of stone steps flush with the house. He mounted the steps, knocked at the door and was instantly admitted. Nodding to the Moorish tailor who sat cross-legged at his craft, he went into the inner room, taking off his coat as he went. Presently he appeared in the doorway.

"You have made all the arrangements?" he asked.

"Yes," said the tailor, not looking up from his work or ceasing to ply his busy needle. "They will wait for you on the road near the English doctor's."

Jim was stripping off his waistcoat when he heard a snore that seemed to shake the ancient house. He looked up to the square opening against which the top of a worn ladder rested.

"Who is there?" he asked from the doorway.

The tailor threaded a needle near-sightedly, but with extraordinary quickness, before he answered.

"A man lives there," he said unconcernedly. "He has the roof which the water-seller had. Yassin the Jew could not find a tenant because the water-seller had smallpox, so he gave it to the Inglezi for six pesetas a month. I pay fifty, but Yassin knows that I can find no other shop, and my fathers lived here since the days of Suliman."

There was a stir up above and the sound of a grumbling voice.

"He smokes," said the tailor. "He will go now to a café where the *hashish* pipe costs ten centimos."

Jim wondered whether it was the characteristic of all lodgers to be addicted to unnatural cravings, and as he wondered, a ragged shoe felt tremulously for the top rung of the ladder. The ankle above the shoe was bare, the ragged trouser leg reached half-way down the calf. Slowly the man descended, and Jim paused, taking stock of him. His hair was a dirty grey and hung over the collar of his shiny coat; the nose thick and red; the mouth a slit that drooped at each end.

He wore a stubbly and uneven red beard as though he had trimmed it himself, and he turned his pale blue eyes upon the visitor with an insolent stare.

"Good evening," he said wheezily.

"English?" said Jim in surprise, and disgusted by the unwholesome appearance of the man.

"Britannic—don't look so infernally sick, my good man. *Honesta mors turpi vita potior!* I can see that noble sentiment in your eyes! By your damnable accent you are either a Colonial or an American, and what the devil you're doing here I don't know. Lend me five pesetas, dear old boy; I'm getting a remittance from home to-morrow."

Jim dropped a Spanish *doura* into the outstretched paw and watched him hobble out into the night.

"Faugh!" said Jim Morlake. "How long has he been here?"

"Five years," said the tailor, "and he owes me five pesetas."

"What is his name?"

"I don't know—what does it matter?"

Jim agreed.

The dingy man had scarcely left the shop when a woman came slowly up the road, guided by a native boy in a narrow brown jellab. He carried a candle lantern in his hand, and if this method of illumination was unnecessary in the main streets, it became vitally essential when they struck the labyrinth of narrow alleys and crooked streets which lay at the back of the post office.

Behind her a porter carried two large grips, for Lydia Hamon had come ashore from the Portuguese West African packet that occasionally sets down passengers at Tangier. Presently they came to the well-lighted guests' entrance of the Continental Hotel, and she dismissed her guide and porter and, after a second's hesitation, wrote her name in the register.

"There is a letter for you, Miss Hamon," said the reception clerk, and took down an envelope from the rack.

It was in Ralph's handwriting, and she dreaded to read the message. In the seclusion of the writing-room she tore open the envelope and took out the sheet of paper it contained.

If you get this before registering, you had better sign the book by an assumed name [it ran]. *The moment you arrive, come up to the house of Sadi Hafiz. I wish to see you urgently. Under no circumstances will you tell anybody that I am here.*

She read the letter and, walking across to the fire, dropped it into the blazing coal and watched it till it was consumed. Then, with a sigh, she went back to the reception clerk.

"I want a boy to guide me up to the Sok," she said.

"Has madam had dinner?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I dined on the ship."

He bustled out into the street. Presently he returned with a diminutive boy, carrying a lantern. Apparently the clerk had told the boy where she wanted to go, for he asked no questions, leading her back to the little market place where the bread sellers sat like sheeted mummies, a candle advertising their wares.

"I want the house of Sadi Hafiz," she said when they were nearing the top of the hill, and without a word he turned off and, coming to a stop before the forbidding door, hammered with his clenched fists.

It was a long time before the call was answered.

"Wait for me here," she said in Spanish. "I shall be returning."

He grunted, blew out his candle, being of an economical turn of mind, and squatted down, pulling his ragged hood over his head.

The door opened, and the keeper of the door scrutinised her for a moment by the light of her lantern, and then shuffled in front of her to the house. Before she could reach the door, Sadi, resplendent in a blue silk robe, was coming down to meet her.

"This is a great honour you have done to my poor house, Miss Hamon," he said in English.

"Is Ralph here?" she asked, cutting short the complimentary flow.

"No, he has been called out of Tangier, but I expect him back very soon."

He led her into the room where Jim Morlake had searched, and clapped his hands vigorously. Half-a-dozen servants came running to obey the summons.

"Sweetmeats for the lady and English tea," he said. "Also bring cigarettes, quickly!"

The room was very dimly illuminated. One electric lamp, heavily shaded in a pseudo-oriental lantern, supplied all the light, and more than half of the apartment was in shadow.

"You will sit down and refresh yourself after your long journey?" he said. "Your brother will be with us soon."

"Are you sure he is coming?" she asked suspiciously. "I'm not staying here—you understand that?"

"Naturally," he said with a touch of asperity in his voice. "My wretched home is not good enough for your ladyship."

"It isn't that, only I prefer the hotel," she said shortly.

Was he deceiving her, she wondered? And then she caught her breath, for she heard Ralph's voice outside. She looked at him in amazement. She had never seen him in Moorish costume before. He kicked off his yellow slippers and came toward her, pulling back the hood of his jellab.

"You got here, then?" he said surlily. "I thought you were arriving yesterday?"

"We were held up at Lisbon. There has been some political trouble there. What did you want?" she said.

At the last minute Ralph had changed his plans and had gone on ahead of her, leaving her to come overland to Lisbon, whilst he went on to Gibraltar.

At a signal from Hamon, Sadi Hafiz withdrew noiselessly, pulling the curtains to hide the ugliness of the prison-like door before he made his exit.

"Lydia, you've got to know I'm in bad," said Hamon. "If what this girl tells me is true, I've made a very bad mistake."

"This girl?" she asked quickly.

"I'm talking about Joan."

"Joan? Is she here? Where?"

"Never mind where she is—she is here."

"Oh, yes!" The tension in her face relaxed. "How you frightened me, Ralph! Of course, the yacht is in the bay: they pointed it out to me as we came in. You have seen her?"

"She is not on the yacht, if that is what you mean," said Ralph roughly. "She is in one of Sadi's houses, twenty miles

from here. She is doubly necessary to me now. She is my hostage, for one thing. Morlake is in Tangier."

She did not speak; she was staring wildly at him as though she could not believe her ears.

"You have Joan Carston! What do you mean—have you taken her—by force?"

He nodded.

"Oh, my God! Ralph, are you mad?"

"I'm very sane," said Hamon. He fumbled in the pocket of his clothes and, finding his case, lit a cigarette. "Yes, I'm very sane."

"You—you haven't hurt her?"

"Don't be a fool," he said roughly. "Why should I hurt her? She is going to be my wife."

"But, Ralph, how can you hope to escape punishment?" she almost wailed.

"It isn't so much hope as knowledge," he said. "There is no law in Morocco: fix that in your mind. The country is chronically at war, and the European governments have no more power than that." He snapped his finger. "They're so jealous that they will not move for fear of giving one another an advantage. You needn't worry about me. And, Lydia, I'm here for good."

"In Morocco?" she said in horror.

He nodded.

"I'm friends with most of the big clansmen," he said, "and after a while, when matters have blown over and Joan has settled down to the new life, I might think of moving, but for the moment I'm here."

"You want me to go back, of course?" she said nervously. "Somebody must settle your affairs in London."

"They're settled," he said. "I sold the house before I left. In fact, I sold everything except Creith. I want to keep that for my children."

"But I have affairs that need settling, Ralph," she said desperately. "I can't stay here. I'll come back if you wish me to——"

"You are not going," he said. "Now listen, Lydia." He

sprang to her side as she reeled, and shook her violently. "I want none of that nonsense," he growled. "The success of my scheme depends on Sadi Hafiz. It is absolutely vital that I should retain his friendship and his support. My life may depend upon it—get that! I don't know how much Welling knows and how much was bluff on Joan's part, but if he knows half as much as she says he does, I'm booked for the drop."

"You—you haven't killed anybody?" she whispered.

"I've been responsible for at least two deaths," he said, and she sank under the shock. "You've been living your artistic life in Paris, getting acquainted with Count this and Countess that —on my money. Did it worry you how it came, or where I got it from? Not that I ever gained a penny from Cornford's death," he said moodily, "but I shall—I shall! That is what decided me to stay here. It doesn't matter what they know then."

She got up unsteadily.

"Ralph, I'm going home," she said ."I can't stand any more."

She held out her hand, but he did not take it, and then, with a little sigh, she walked to the curtains and pulled them back, turning the handle of the door. It did not move.

"Locked," said her brother laconically. "You're going home, are you? Well, this is your home, Lydia—this and Sadi's house in the hills. I've made a good match for you."

She stared at him incredulously.

"You mean . . . you want me to marry a Moor? Ralph, you don't mean that?"

"Well, I don't know what else I mean," he said. "Lydia, you've got to make the best of things. This house is rotten, I admit, but the other place in the hills is wonderful. And it'll be good for Joan to have a woman handy like you." He chuckled. "That'll swamp a little of her pride, having Sadi Hafiz as a brother-in-law."

The thought seemed to please him, for he chuckled.

She was trapped—as much trapped as Joan Carston. She knew that it was useless to make any appeal to him. Ralph Hamon had never shrunk from the sacrifice of his relatives, and would not do so now.

She was about to speak when the door was unlocked and flung open, and Sadi Hafiz ran in.

"Quick!" he cried earnestly. "Get out—through the little gate! The house is surrounded by the *basha's* soldiers. They may be coming to arrest me: I shall know soon, but nothing can happen to me. Take her away!"

Ralph seized her by the arm and led her at a run into the courtyard. He seemed to know his way without guidance, for he came to the little gate that led to the Street of Schools. The door had already been unlocked. As they passed through, the door was slammed on them by Hafiz himself, and they were a long way from the house before the sound of the heavy knocking on the front gates died away.

The sight of a Moorish man and a European woman excited no comment. Ralph, his face shaded by his hood, shuffled along by her side, never once relaxing his hold of her arm. They came to the Sok, deserted at this hour of the night, and she turned instinctively to the hill which would take her back to the Continental.

"Oh no, you don't," he said between his teeth. "I know a little place where you can stay the night."

"Ralph, for God's sake let me go!" she begged.

And then, out of the shadows, came a man who was wearing a long fur-lined coat. The collar was turned up to his ears, and between its ends protruded the stump of a glowing cigar.

"Can I be of any assistance, madam?"

Ralph heard the voice and, dropping the girl's arm, turned and ran into the night.

There were many people he expected to meet in Tangier, but Julius Welling was not one of them.

Hamon raced across the dark market place and along a narrow, twisting lane, hedged with cactus, and was slowing to a walk when he saw somebody coming toward him and stepped aside to avoid the passer. Unfortunately, the unknown made a similar movement and they came into violent collision.

"Curse you!" snapped Ralph in English. "Look where you are going!"

He was startled when the reply came in the same language.

"Blundering hound! Have you eyes, oaf? To barge against a gentleman—you're drunk, sir!"

Arrested by the tone of the man's voice, Ralph struck a match and nearly dropped it again when he saw the blotched face and the red beard.

"E tenebris oritur lux," murmured the smoker of hashish. "Forgive me if my language was a little unrefined—excuse me!"

He threw back his head and searched the moonlit heavens.

"Would it be too much to ask you to point out the Gemma in the Constellation of Orion? I live somewhere underneath. In a foul den, sir, above a beastly Moorish tailor's shop. And what am I, dear friend? A gentleman of the cloth! No unfrocked priest—but a gentleman of the cloth—a reverend gentleman! And an officer holding the supreme decoration of the world, the Victoria Cross, sir! Aylmer Bernando Bannockwaite, sir—could you of your amazing kindness lend me five pesetas . . . my remittance arrives to-morrow . . ."

Like a man in a dream Ralph Hamon pushed a note into the man's hand.

Bannockwaite—the man who had made Joan and Ferdie Farringdon husband and wife!

CHAPTER LVI

Captain Welling Adds a Postscript

AT THE corner of the hilly street, Julius Welling waited for the girl to grow calmer.

"Thank you, thank you!" she was sobbing hysterically. "Will you please see me to my hotel? I'm so grateful!"

"Was that man molesting you?" he asked.

"Yes—no—he was a friend. It was my brother."

He stopped dead.

"Your brother?"

"And then, in the light of a standard, she saw his face.

"Captain Welling!" she gasped.

"That is my name. You must be Miss Lydia Hamon. I've been looking for you all over town. Was that your brother?"

She swallowed something.

"No," she said.

"I see it was," said the imperturbable detective. "Curiously enough, I never thought of his wearing Moorish costume. Why I shouldn't have expected that little piece of theatricality I don't know. It is very becoming; I'm thinking of buying a jellab to take back to London," he mused, and even the incongruous picture of Captain Julius Welling in a white, loose-sleeved wrap did not give her any amusement.

He walked all the way back to the hotel, and she was glad. It gave her an opportunity of making her plans. They were walking up the narrow lane in which the Continental is situated, when she said suddenly:

"Captain Welling, I am afraid of my brother."

"I don't wonder," he murmured. "I am a little afraid of him myself—in a way."

"Would it be possible," she asked, "to put somebody to guard me? That sounds very stupid, but——"

"I think I understand," said the detective. "That is simply arranged. What is the number of your room?"

"I don't even know," she said despairingly, and then: "Are you staying at the Continental?"

He nodded.

"I think I can arrange to have my room moved next to yours," he said, but on examination of the register he found that was unnecessary. She occupied a room at the end of the second floor corridor; and, by a coincidence, Captain Welling was in the next room.

At half-past eleven, when the hotel door was closing, there came a Moor with a letter addressed to Lydia, and Welling took it up to her. She opened the door to him, opened the

envelope and read; then, without a word, she handed the letter to the old man.

Everything was all right [it ran]. *It was only the basha's bluff. Sadi Hafiz says that Morlake saw the basha this evening, and the raid was the result. Come up for a few minutes and be civil to Sadi. I will bring you back to the hotel myself.*

"May I answer this?" said Welling, a twinkle in his eye.

When she nodded, he found his fountain pen, and, writing at the bottom:

Come down and have a talk.—J. W.

he enclosed it in an envelope and took it back to the waiting messenger.

"I don't think he will come," he said, when he returned to the girl. "For your sake I hope he doesn't."

Welling went to bed that night without any fear of being disturbed. Hamon would not run the risk of putting himself in the detective's way, for, although the evidence that the police had against him was scrappy and not sufficient to justify the hope even of a committal, let alone a conviction, Ralph Hamon would be ignorant of its incompleteness, and his conscience would occupy the gaps which Welling was trying to fill.

He was a light sleeper, and the first pebble that struck his window pane woke him. He did not put on the light, but, getting noiselessly out of bed, he opened half of his window and looked out cautiously.

Two men, one carrying a lantern, were standing in the lane below. He saw one raise his hand and throw a stone. This time it struck Lydia's window, and he heard her walk across the room.

"Is that Miss Hamon?" asked a low voice.

"Yes?" she replied. "Who is that?"

"It is Sadi Hafiz. Your brother has shot himself!"

Welling heard her cry of distress, but did not move.

"Will you come down?" urgently, and then: "I am afraid

he cannot live, and he has given me something for you, something he wants you to give to Mr. Morlake."

"Wait—I will come immediately," she said hurriedly.

Welling waited to hear no more, but pulled on his slippers and his overcoat. She must have been fully dressed, for she was out of sight by the time he was in the corridor, and he heard her fumbling with the locks and chains of the front door. She opened it at last, and, peering over the stairway, he saw the Moor enter.

"When did this happen?"

Her voice was trembling.

"It happened last night. Apparently your brother had seen a police officer he knew, and he came back to my house in a state of great trouble. I left him for a little while to get coffee, and I had hardly turned my back before I heard a shot, and, running in, found him lying on the divan."

"He is not dead?"

Sadi Hafiz shook his head.

"For a moment, no. You have nothing to fear because the house is in possession of the *basha's* soldier's," he said, "and Captain Morlake is there. Will you come?"

"You said you had something for me."

He put his hand into his breast and took out a little package, which he handed to her. In another instant she had followed him through the door into the dark street.

Welling, old as he was, jumped the last six stairs, and, flying across the hallway, reached her just as she put her foot on the street step.

"One minute," he said, and jerked her through the door.

And then, with amazing agility, he leapt aside to avoid the bludgeon stroke that was aimed at him by a man concealed in the deep doorway. In another second he was in the house, the doors locked, and he had switched on the hall light.

"Fooled 'em!" he said breathlessly.

"But, Mr. Welling—my brother——"

"Your brother has not shot himself. That kind of guy never does."

He took the envelope from her hand.

"They were killing two birds with one stone, young lady, but I was the real burnt-offering. This wonderful something is, of course, a blank sheet of paper."

He took her back to her room, bewildered and dazed by the happening.

"You don't think that it is true?"

"I know it is not true," he said. "The stone that was thrown at my window was intended to wake me, and it was intended that I should overhear your conversation. And the general idea, as they say in military circles, was that, as soon as I put my foot outside the street door, I was to get it in the neck—and I nearly did! On the whole, I think I have taken too unflattering a view of the Oriental mind. They are clever!"

CHAPTER LVII

The Ride to the Hills

THAT night held for Joan Carston an unbelievable experience. For four hours she sat on an ambling mule, passing through a country which she could not see, and the very character of which was a mystery to her. They were following, so far as she could tell, no beaten tracks, and from time to time her feet were caught by thorn-like bushes that clung to the soft white wrap she wore.

At daybreak she saw that they were in a wild and apparently uninhabited country. The party consisted of six men and the girl who had looked after her at her resting place. One of the men lit a fire and put on a pot of water, whilst another took the mules to a stream which must have been near but which was not visible to her.

She looked around, trying in vain to recall such physical features of Morocco as she had learnt at school, that would

enable her to identify the spot. Blue mountains bordered half the horizon, and far away in the distance she saw an isolated mountain of peculiar shape, which she recognised as the crest of Gibraltar. One of the men found a little bower in the bushes and spread a blanket, signing to her to sleep. But Joan had never felt more wide awake, and though she retired to such privacy as the "bower" offered, it was only to lie and think and think, and then to think again.

The Moorish girl brought her a large tumblerful of coffee and an oaten cake, and she was glad of this refreshment, for she had had nothing to eat since her lunch on the previous day.

"Have we far to go?" she asked in halting Spanish.

The Moorish girl shook her head, but volunteered no information.

After two hours' rest the cavalcade got in movement again, and it puzzled her why such isolated travellers as they met with did not show any surprise at the appearance of a European woman, until she remembered that she was wearing Moorish dress. If they stared at her at all, it was because she did not veil her face when she passed them.

The hills were growing nearer, and she saw a little white patch on the slope, without realising that that was their objective. The patch grew to a definite shape as the way began to lead uphill, and she could not but admire the beautiful setting of the house. It looked like a white jewel, and even from that distance she could guess the glory of the gardens laid out on terraces above and below.

Here the country was undulating, and they were threading their way between the bushes down a gentle slope, when she saw a man sitting on a sorry-looking horse a little distance to their right. The rest of the members of the party paid him no attention, but the Moorish girl, who was now riding by her side, used a word that Joan understood.

"A mendicant?" she said in surprise, and might have been amused in other circumstances at the spectacle of a beggar on horseback.

He was an elderly man with a beard in which grey predominated. His face looked as if it had never known soap and

water. The tarboosh at the back of his head was old and greasy. He stared at the party as it passed, and the Moorish girl dropped her veil and signed to her companion to follow her example.

Joan was too interested. She took stock of the man as they passed, noted the ragged jellab that covered his stooping frame, the discoloured shirt that showed at his throat, and thought that she had never seen anything quite so repulsive.

"Alms!" he bawled when they were level with him. "Alms, in the name of God the Compassionate!"

One of the party flung him a copper coin and he caught it dexterously in his uncleanly hands.

"Alms, O my beautiful rose, in the name of the Compassionate and Merciful, pity the poor!"

His voice sank away to a drone.

The girl was ready to drop from weariness before they reached the open gates that took them through the gardens to the house. Near at hand, the white house was even more beautiful than it had appeared from the distance. It was nearly new, yet its walls were smothered with begonias.

"It must be beautiful in the summer," she said in English before she realised that the girl at her side could not understand her.

Before the door stood a big pillared porch, so much out of architectural harmony that she wondered what freak had induced the owner to add this European finish to a building which, in its graceful, simple lines, was wholly satisfying.

As she walked into the house, the girl, who seemed to be as much a stranger to the place as she, ran forward to ask a question in a whisper of the women who were curiously regarding the arrival. One of these came forward, a stout woman with a heavy face, disfigured at the moment with a scowl which made her forbidding. She said something in a sharp tone, and when Joan shook her head to signify that she did not understand, she clicked her lips impatiently. Pointing to a door, the Moorish girl, who seemed in awe of the stout lady, opened it and beckoned Joan forward.

The room was exquisitely furnished and reminded her of

an English drawing-room, except that the windows, like those in most of the Moorish houses, were barred. She looked round curiously, and then asked in Spanish:

"Who is that fat woman?"

The Moorish girl giggled shrilly.

"That is the Señora Hamon," she said, and Joan sat down suddenly on the nearest divan and shook with helpless laughter.

She might become the principal, but she certainly would not be the first wife of Mr. Ralph Hamon!

CHAPTER LVIII

At the White House

"WHO are the other women? Are they his wives also?" she asked drily.

The little Moor shook her head.

"There is only one wife here," she said, and Joan managed to follow her Spanish without difficulty. "The others are women of attendance. The wife does not live here; she came a little time ago. She has not seen her husband for many years."

She spoke slowly, repeating her words when Joan failed to grasp the meaning.

"Thank you," said the girl.

"*Claro?*" asked the little Moor, whose name was Zuleika.

"Perfectly *claro,*" said Joan with a smile.

Why she should be so extraordinarily cheerful at this, which promised to be the most tragic moment of her life, puzzled her. It might have been the tang of the fresh mountain air that induced the strange exhilaration in her heart; or was it the consciousness that the future could hold no surprises for her, that enabled her to draw a line under her misfortunes and seek for some balance on the credit side of life's ledger? The ceiling reminded her of Jim's room: it was made of thick white

plaster, in which Moorish workmen, with their sharp knives, had cut so delicate a tracery that it almost seemed that the ceiling was made of frothing lace.

European houses must have supplied the furniture and the panelling. The big blue carpet, bordered with arabesques of gold and brown, had been woven in one piece on the looms of Persia. She saw the European touch in the white marble fireplace, with its green pillars and its crouching lions. Ralph Hamon must have had this retreat in his mind all his life, for she detected at a glance the care which had been exercised in choosing every single article in the room.

Beautiful it was, but a prison! It might be something worse.

At the far end of the chamber a wide window was covered on the outside by a hand-worked grille of wrought iron. She opened the window and leant out, taking in the beauty of the wide valley. From here she caught the distant sparkle of the sea, and, turning her head, saw that the bulk of Gibraltar was in view.

She noticed something moving in the valley, and shaded her eyes from the glare of the setting sun. It was the beggar, and he was riding back on the Tangier Road. For one second her poise was disturbed.

"Joan, Joan," she said breathlessly, "you are not going to weep or faint or do anything equally feminine, are you?" and she shook her head.

Closing the window, she walked back to the door and turned the silver handle. She did not expect it to open as it did. The hall was empty; the swing doors were not fastened Apparently she was to be given a certain amount of liberty, and for that at least she was grateful.

But once she was in the garden, she saw how hopeless any thought of escape must be. The wall about the property was unusually high, even for a Moorish house, and was crowned at the top by spears of broken glass that glittered in the sunlight, as though to remind her that escape that way was futile.

The gate was equally impossible. There was a little brick lean-to built against the wall, in which the gatekeeper slept, and she was reminded (and again she felt that pang of poignant

sorrow) of Creith and the empty lodge which Lord Creith could never afford to fill.

Tired and sickened against her fierce determination to keep all thoughts of home, of father and of someone else out of her mind, she went back to the big room, which was evidently reserved for her, since nobody else came to relieve her solitude.

News had been brought to Ralph Hamon of the successful ending of the flight, and he rode across the uneven country, a fierce song of triumph in his soul, his eyes glued upon the white house in the hills.

At last! Joan Carston was his, in every possessive sense. He had had a secret interview with a red-bearded man in Tangier, and now his happiness was complete. Sadi Hafiz, who rode by his side, was in a less cheerful frame of mind. He had seen his cup of joy shattered whilst it was almost at his lips, and Ralph Hamon had found him a sulky and uncompanionable fellow-passenger.

"We shall get there soon after sunset," said Ralph.

"Why I go there at all, Heaven knows," said Sadi pettishly. He invariably spoke in English, priding himself, with reason, not only upon his extraordinary knowledge of the language but his acquaintance with the rich classics of that tongue. "You've made a bungling mess of my affairs, Hamon!"

Ralph Hamon laughed coarsely, not being in the mood to feel angry, even at so unjust an accusation.

"Who was it came flying into the room and saying that the *basha* and his soldiers were at the door? Who practically turned her out of the house when he had her safe? Whose plan was it to wake up the detective so that he might be quietened, when it would have been a simple matter, as was proved, to have brought Lydia to your house? I haven't bungled it, Sadi. You must have patience. Lydia is still in Tangier, and will probably remain there for a few days, and it should not be difficult, if I could bring my lady to this place——"

"If *you* could bring!" sneered the other. "Inshallah! Who brought her but me, the Shereef Sadi Hafiz?"

"She is lovely," said the unthinking Hamon with enthusiasm.

"Why else should I be making this journey?" said Sadi

coldly, and something in his tone made Ralph Hamon look round.

"You may satisfy your curiosity and then you may go," he said curtly, "and bestow your attentions where they are most likely to be acceptable. Let there be no mistake about this, Sadi: this girl is to marry me."

The shereef shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Women are as many as beggars," he quoted, and jerked his head to the nondescript figure that was ambling toward them.

"Alms, in the name of Allah the Compassionate and Merciful!" moaned the beggar, and Ralph looked at him without interest. He had seen such sights too often.

"A toothless old devil," he said, and in the manner of the East flung him a coin.

"God grant you happy dreams," whined the mendicant, and urged his horse after him. "Gain joy in heaven and the pleasure of the prophets," he moaned, "by giving me one little house to sleep in to-night, for I am an old man . . . !"

Sadi, being what he was, could bear this appeal philosophically. Ralph turned with a smile and glared into the red-rimmed eyes.

"Get away, you dog!" he roared, but the old man followed on, continuing his supplications in a monotonous whine.

"Let me sleep in the shadow of your house, O my beautiful bird of paradise! Give me a blanket and a little roof, for the nights are cold and I am a very ancient man."

"Let him alone," said Sadi. "Why do you argue with beggars, and you so long in Morocco?"

So they suffered the old man to follow them at a distance, until the door slammed in the long face of his horse, and he went, grumbling and complaining, down the hillside, and later Ralph saw him, his horse hobbled by the leg grazing in the coarse grass, and a blue line of smoke rising from the bushes where the ancient beggar ate his dinner.

Ralph Hamon had an unpleasant task, and he was not particularly anxious to go to it. He dined with Sadi in a small room off the hall.

"You're not a very ardent lover," said the Moor. "Have you seen her?"

"She can wait," replied Hamon.

"Then I will meet her," said Sadi blandly. And seeing the other's hesitation: "After all, you're not a Mussulman, and I think the young lady might be reassured to meet a Moorish gentleman and to learn that we are not wholly without good breeding."

"I'll take you in to her later, but I have something else to do," said Ralph shortly.

The "something else" was to interview a woman whom he had not seen for eight years. As he walked into her room, it seemed impossible that this stout, scowling female was once a Moorish lady of considerable beauty, slim and wholly delectable.

"So you have come, Hamon?" she said harshly. "All these years I have not heard from you or seen you."

"Have you been hungry?" asked Hamon coolly. "Have you been without a roof or a bed?"

"Who is this girl you have brought here?" asked the woman suspiciously.

"She will soon be my wife," replied Hamon, and the woman leapt up, quivering with anger.

"Then why did you bring me here?" she stormed. "To make me look a fool before my servants? Why did you not leave me at Mogador? At least I have friends there. Here I am buried alive in the wilderness. And why? That I should be a slave to your new wife? I will not do it, Hamon!"

Hamon felt sure of himself now.

"You can go back to Mogador next week. You are here for a purpose of my own."

She brooded awhile.

"Does she know?" she asked.

"I told the girl to tell her, so I suppose she does," said Hamon carelessly.

He had indeed a very excellent purpose to serve. His Moorish "wife" had been brought post haste to the house in the hills

that Joan might see her, and, seeing her, understand. The subtle mind of Ralph Hamon was never better illustrated than in this act of his.

He went back to Sadi Hafiz.

"I'm going to see my lady," he said, "and afterwards I will bring you in."

He tapped at the door of the drawing-room, and as there was no answer, he turned the handle and walked in. Joan was on a music-stool before the grand piano, her hands folded on her lap. All the evening she had been trying to work up an inclination to play, and she had at last brought herself to the piano when Hamon made his appearance.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

She did not reply. He stood for a while, admiring the straight figure and the calm, imperturbable face. A lesser breed would have shown the hatred and loathing she felt, but not a line of her face changed, and he might have been a servant of Creith who had come at her summons, so unmoved and unemotional was her reception.

"It is a beautiful place, eh? One of the loveliest in Morocco," he went on. "A girl could be happy here for a year or two. Have you seen Number One?"

He sat down, uninvited, and lit a cigar.

"By Number One I presume you mean Mrs. Hamon?"

He nodded. She had never seen Ralph Hamon look quite so cheerful as he did at that moment. It was as though all the trouble in the world had rolled away from him and left him care-free and buoyant of heart.

"When I say 'first,'" said Joan carefully, "I of course expose my ignorance of Moorish customs. At any rate, she is the first I have seen."

"And the last you'll see, Joan," he said with a laugh. "Marriages, they say, are made in heaven. Pleasant alliances can be made in Morocco, but Number One, first, last and all the time, will be Lady Joan Hamon."

A shadow of a smile came and went.

"It sounds beastly, doesn't it?" she said frankly.

She had a trick of irritating him more than any other human

being. She could get under his skin and drag on the raw places. For a second his eyes blazed, and then, swallowing his rage, he forced a laugh. Secretly he admired her cool insolence, and would gladly have imitated her if it were possible.

"It may sound bad, but it is a good enough name for me," he said.

"Is that a Moorish custom too?" she asked coolly. "That a girl takes the name of the man who abducts her? You must instruct me in the Moorish marriage laws; I'm afraid I'm totally ignorant on the subject."

He crossed to where she was sitting, pulling his chair with him.

"Now listen, Joan," he said quietly. "There is to be no Moorish marriage. There is to be an honest-to-God marriage, conducted by a fully ordained minister of the Episcopalian Church, with wedding ring and the usual paraphernalia. I asked you just now, had you seen my Moorish wife, and I guess you have. What do you think of her?"

Joan did not speak. She was trying to discover what he was aiming at.

"What do you think of her?" he asked again.

"I feel extremely sorry for her. She wasn't particularly pleasant to me, but I have every sympathy with her."

"You have, eh? Fat, isn't she? Pasty-faced and over-fed. They go like that in Morocco. It is the dark of the harem, the absence of liberty and exercise. It is being treated like cattle, locked up in a hothouse atmosphere day and night, and exercised for half-an-hour a day under the eyes of slaves. Why, it is worse than being in prison. That is what it means to be a Moorish wife. Joan, do you want to be a Moorish wife?"

She met his eyes straightly.

"I don't want to be any kind of wife to you," she said.

"Do you want to be a Moorish wife?" he asked her. "Or do you want to be married, and have children who can bear your name and inherit your father's title?"

She rose abruptly from the stool and walked to the end of the room, her back toward him.

"We won't go any farther into this question for the mo-

ment," said Ralph rising. "I'd like you to meet a very dear friend of mine, Sadi Hafiz, and be civil to him, do you hear, but not too civil."

Something in his tone made her turn.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because he is feeling sore with me just now. He is very keen on Lydia, and Lydia has slipped him. I don't want him to have ideas about you."

He left her to meditate upon this warning, and went out, to return with the silk-robed Sadi, and a new factor came immediately into play. One glance Joan gave, and she knew that this man was as great a danger as Ralph Hamon. Greater, for if he was as remorseless, he was less susceptible, since he had not that brand of human vanity which made Ralph Hamon so easy to handle. She hated him, with his fat, expressionless face and his dark, unblinking eyes that looked at her through and through, appraising her as though she were cattle. She hated him for the veneer of his civilisation, his polite English, his ready smile.

Here, then, was the danger: this she recognised instantly.

Sadi Hafiz did not remain very long—just long enough to create an impression. In Joan's case he would have been surprised if he had read her heart and mind, for he rather flattered himself upon his flair for imposing his personality upon women.

"What do you think of him?" asked Ralph when he had gone.

"I haven't thought," she said untruthfully.

"A good friend and a bad enemy," said Hamon sententiously. "I wish Lydia had had a little more sense. She owes me something."

Joan thought it was possible that he might owe Lydia something too, but was not in the mood for conversation. Unexpectedly he rose.

"I'm going now. You'll find your sleeping room, I suppose? Pleasant dreams!"

She said nothing.

At the door he turned.

"A Christian wife has a better time than a Moorish wife. I guess you've noticed that already."

Still she did not speak.

"We'll be married in two days," he said, and, with a crooked smile: "Would you like anybody else to come to the wedding?"

"You dare not," she was taunted into saying. "You dare not produce an English clergyman!"

"Oh, daren't I?" he said. "I'll not only produce him, but he'll marry us whatever you say, and whatever protests you make. You're going to meet an old friend, Joan."

"An old friend?" She was for the moment taken aback.

"An old clerical friend," said Hamon. "The Reverend Mr. Bannockwaite," and with this parting shot he left her, and she heard the key turn in the lock.

CHAPTER LIX

The Face at the Window

SADI was waiting for him in the smoking-room, and so absorbed was the Moor in his thoughts that he did not hear Hamon until his name was called.

"Eh?" he said, looking up. "Allah, you frightened me. Yes, yes, she is a pretty woman—not the Moorish kind, and too thin for my liking. But you Aryans prefer them that way; I have never understood why."

Hamon was not deceived; the girl had made a tremendous impression upon the Moor and he was watchful and alert.

"Do you like her better than Lydia?" he asked humorously, as he poured out a drink from the decanter.

The Moor shrugged his shoulders.

"In some ways Lydia is impossible," he said.

That was a bad sign and Hamon knew it. The thought of Lydia had absorbed this man to the exclusion of all else, and

now he could talk of her critically and without heat—a very bad sign.

"Shall you go back to Tangier to-morrow?" he asked, and his eyes narrowed when the Moor shook his head.

"No, I have decided to stay on for a little while. I need the change. It has been a nervous time for me."

"But you promised to bring Bannockwaite?"

"He will come without any assistance from me. I've told one of my men. Besides, your English agent could arrange to bring him. He'll come if you pay him."

"Do you know him very well?" asked Hamon.

"I've seen him. He has become quite a character in Tangier," said Sadi Hafiz. "He arrived during the war and the story I have heard is that he got drunk on the eve of the Battle of the Somme and deserted. He is a man entirely without principle, surely he could not perform the marriage ceremony? You told me he was unfrocked."

Ralph shook his head.

"His name appeared in the official list of clergymen of the Established Church until he was reported missing on the Somme. I have an idea it is still in the list; but even if it isn't, that would not invalidate the marriage."

"Why marry at all?" asked the Moor, looking up suddenly. "You are a stickler for the conventions. my friend."

Ralph smiled.

"Not so much as you think," he said. "I've a reason. The Creith title will descend through my wife to her children."

Again the Moor shrugged.

"It is a freakish idea," he said, "but then, freakishness has been responsible for your downfall, Hamon."

"I have not fallen yet," snarled Hamon.

"But you will," said the other, "unless," he went on quickly, seeing the look of distrust and suspicion in the man's eyes, "unless you elect to remain here in Morocco, outside the jurisdiction of the embassies."

He stretched his arms and yawned.

"I'm going to bed," he said. "You will be pleased to learn that I've decided to go back to Tangier in the morning."

He saw the look of relief in the other's face and smiled inwardly.

"And I will send along your Bannockwaite under escort."

When Hamon woke the next morning, he learnt that the Shereef had departed, and was thankful. He did not go in to Joan, though he saw her, from his room, walking in the garden.

Hamon's plan was not wholly dictated by a desire to break into the peerage. As Creith's son-in-law he would be possessed of powerful influence. It was not likely that the Earl would kick once the girl was married; and he knew her well enough to be satisfied that, if she bore his name, she would at least be outwardly loyal.

He mounted a horse and went down the hillside, and his way took him past the camp of the old beggar. The scarecrow horse raised his head to view him for a moment, and resumed its grazing, but the old man was not in sight. A fantastic idea came to him and he grinned at the thought. There was something about Ralph Hamon that was not quite normal.

In the evening his servant reported that a party was approaching the house, and, taking his glasses, he inspected the three men who were riding across the wild country in his direction. Two were Moors; the third, who rolled about on his horse like somebody drunk, he recognised, though he had never seen him except by match light, and, hastily running from the house, he was waiting at the open gates when the Rev. Aylmer Bannockwaite arrived.

The man almost fell from his horse, but recovered himself with the aid of the Moor who was with him and who evidently expected some such accident, for he had sprung off his horse the moment the party halted and run to the clergyman's side.

Bannockwaite turned his bloated face to his host, but, ignoring the outstretched hand, he fumbled in his dilapidated waistcoat and produced a glass, which he fixed in his eye.

"Who are you and what are you?" he said irritably. "You have brought me across this wretched country, you have interfered with my proper and pleasant recreations—now what the devil do you mean by it?"

"I'm sorry if I have inconvenienced you, Mr. Bannockwaite," said Ralph, humouring the man.

"Handsomely said."

A big, flabby paw gripped Ralph Hamon's feebly.

"Handsomely said, my boy. Now if you can give me a little time to rest, and a pipe of that seductive hemp to steady my nerves and stimulate my imagination I'm your friend for life. And if you will add a glass of the priceless Marsala and a scented cigarette, I am your slave body and soul!"

Watching from her window, Joan saw the obscene figure, and immediately guessed his identity. Could that be Bannockwaite, the tall, dapper ascetic? She had only seen him twice, and yet . . . there was a likeness; something in his walk, in the roll of his head. She stared open-mouthed until he had passed out of view, then sat, her head in her hands, trying to bring into order that confusion of her thoughts.

It was Bannockwaite. Then he was not dead: Bannockwaite, the fastidious, half-mad parson, the idol of Hulston, the inventor of bizarre secret societies was this gross and uncleanly creature whose rags and dirt were an offence to the eye.

How had Ralph Hamon found him, she wondered, and changed the current of her thoughts as she realised the unprofit of speculation.

Bannockwaite would marry her, whatever were her protests; that she knew instinctively. Even if he had been his old, sane self—if he ever were sane—the queer situation would have so appealed to him that he would not have hesitated.

Ralph made no appearance that night, although she expected him to bring the besotted parson to meet her. The bedroom led from the principal apartment, a large room, furnished in the Empire style. The window here was barred, with less elegance but as effectively as the bigger room. She waited until twelve, and then, undressing, she put over the night attire that the Moorish girl had brought her a long fleecy cloak, and, pulling a chair to the window and having extinguished the light, pulled back the curtain. As she did, she screamed and almost dropped with fright. A face was staring at her through the bars, long-bearded, hook-nosed, red-eyed, hideous! It was the wandering

mendicant and in his teeth he held a long knife that glittered in the moonlight.

CHAPTER LX

The Marriage

HE HEARD the scream and dropped quickly out of sight and she stood, holding on to the window-ledge, her heart thumping painfully. Who was he, and what did he want? How did he come into the garden? In the house complete silence reigned. Nobody had heard the scream, for the walls were thick.

It took an effort to thrust open the window and look out as far as the bars would allow her. The little garden looked peaceful and mysterious in the moon's rays. Long shadows ran across the ground; strange shapes seemed to appear and disappear. And then she saw him, moving cautiously toward the wall. In another instant he was beyond her view.

Why did she associate this midnight prowler in her mind with Sadi Hafiz? And yet she did. Was he some agent of this cunning Moor? The knife had not been intended for her; of that she was sure.

It was daylight before she went to bed and she was sleeping heavily when Zuleika brought in coffee and fruit and drew aside the curtains.

"Zuleika," she said in her halting Spanish, which had improved since she had had an opportunity of talking to the girl, "do you remember the old beggar we saw, the mendicant on the horse?"

"Yes, Lady," said the girl, nodding.

"Who is he?"

The girl smiled.

"There are many in Morocco. Some say they are the spies of the chieftains."

A spy of Sadi Hafiz! Put there to watch her arrival—why? Again that fear of the Moor swept through her, but she was

left little time that morning to meditate, either upon her terrifying experience of the night or the intentions of Sadi. She had hardly dressed and finished her breakfast when Ralph came in. He was brisk and gave her a cheerful and smiling good-morning.

"Joan, I want you to meet the Rev. Aylmer Bannockwaite," he said. "I think you've met him before. Anyway, you'll find him changed. This gentleman has consented to perform the necessary ceremony that will mark, I hope, the beginning of a happier and a brighter time for both of us."

She did not reply.

"Are you going to be sensible, Joan? I'm trying to do the right thing by you. You're absolutely alone here, and there is nobody within a hundred miles who'd raise their hand if I killed you."

"When do you wish——" she hesitated.

"To-day, immediately," he said.

She was panic-stricken.

"You must give me time to think this matter over, Mr. Hamon," she said. "To-morrow——"

"To-day," he insisted. "I'm not going to let another day pass. I think I know my friend Sadi Hafiz. Sadi has enough respect for the law and the sanctity of married life," he sneered, "to leave you alone if you're married. But if I wait until to-morrow——" He shrugged his shoulders.

But there was no yielding in her determined face.

"I absolutely refuse to marry you." she said, "and if Mr. Bannockwaite has a lingering remnant of decency he will refuse to perform the ceremony."

"You can make up your mind on one point," said Hamon, "that he hasn't even the dregs of decency. You'd better meet him. He is more or less exhilarated now and is more bearable than he will be."

In the morning sunlight, Aylmer Bannockwaite looked even more horrible than he had in the kindly blue of the dusk. She shuddered. It seemed as though some horrible incarnation of evil had come into the room as he strutted forward with his plump hand outstretched.

"It is my dear little Carston girl!" he said jovially. "Well, this is the most amazing coincidence—that I should marry you twice is an especial privilege!"

One glance she gave at his face and shuddered. Thereafter, she never looked beyond the second button of his stained waistcoat.

"I am not going to be married, Mr. Bannockwaite. I want you to understand that distinctly; if you marry me, it is against my will."

"Tut, tut!" said Bannockwaite loudly. "This will never do. A shy bride! 'Standing with reluctant feet where the brook and river meet,' eh? God bless my life! Marriage is the natural state of mankind. It has ever been a matter for regret to me——"

"I won't marry him, I won't, I won't," she flamed. "If I am to be married, I'll be married decently by a clean man to a clean man!"

She stood erect, her eyes blazing, her finger outstretched in accusation.

"I know you now. You look what you are, what you always have been, and all your posturing and posing does not disguise you. You are corruption in human form—Ada called you 'The Beast with the silver tongue,' and she was right."

That was her curious and hateful gift—to touch the raw places of human vanity. The man's thick underlip stuck out; there was an insane fury in his eyes that momentarily frightened her.

"You Jezebel!" he boomed. "I'll marry you, if they hang me for it! And it will be legal and binding on you, woman! I posture, do I? I pose? You, you——"

Hamon gripped his arm.

"Steady," he whispered, and then, to the girl: "Now, Joan, what is the use of this foolishness? He was good enough a parson to marry you before."

"I won't marry you, I won't!" She stamped her foot. "I would sooner marry the beggar I saw on the roadside. I'd sooner marry the meanest slave in your household than marry

you, a thief and a murderer—a man to whom no crime is too mean. I'd rather marry——"

"A burglar?" he said, white with passion.

"Ten thousand times yes—if you mean Jim Morlake. I love him, Hamon. I'll go on loving him till I die!"

"You will, will you?" he muttered. And then, turning, he ran out of the room, leaving her alone with the clergyman.

"How can you, Mr. Bannockwaite? How have you brought yourself to this low level?" she asked sternly. "Is there nothing in you that is wholesome to which a woman could appeal?"

"I don't want the heads of a sermon from you," he growled. "I will have you understand that I am intellectually your superior, socially your equal——"

"And morally the mud under my feet," she said scornfully.

For a moment she thought he would strike her. His bloated face grew first purple with passion, then faded to a pasty white.

"Intellectually your superior and socially your equal," he muttered again. "I am superior to your insults. *Telum imbelle sine ictu!*"

And then came a half-mad Hamon, dragging behind him a man, at the sight of whom Joan reeled backward. It was the beggar, a grinning, fawning toothless old man, horrible to look upon as he came cringing into this lovely room.

"Here is your husband!" almost shrieked the demented man. "Look at him! You'd sooner marry a beggar, would you, damn you! Well, you shall marry him and you shall have the desert for your honeymoon!"

She looked from the beggar to Bannockwaite and, even in her distress, she could not help thinking that she had never seen two more hideous men in her life.

"Get your book, Bannockwaite!" yelled Hamon. He was frothing at the mouth, so utterly beside himself that he seemed inhuman.

From his pocket, Bannockwaite produced a small book and opened it.

"You'll want witnesses," he said, and again Hamon dashed out, returning with half-a-dozen servants.

And there, under the curious eyes of the tittering Moors

Lady Joan Carston was married to Abdul Azim. Hamon muttered something in Arabic to the man, and then the girl felt herself caught by the arm and pulled and led through the hall into the garden.

Hamon dragged her to the open gates and flung her out with such violence that she nearly fell.

"Take your husband back to Creith!" he howled. "By God, you'll be glad to come back to me!"

CHAPTER LXI

The Beggar Husband

HAMON pushed the beggar out after his bride and slammed the gate on him.

Joan tried to walk, stumbled, recovered again, and then she knew no more. She recovered from her faint, lying under the shadow of a big juniper bush. Her face and neck were wet; a bowl of water was by her side. The old beggar had disappeared, and, raising herself on her elbow, she saw him unhobbling his sorry-looking horse. What should she do? She came unsteadily to her feet and looked round wildly. Escape was impossible.

And then she saw, far away in the valley, a cloud of dust. A party was approaching, and, straining her eyes, she caught sight of white *jellabs* and the glint of steel. It was a party of Moors, probably Sadi Hafiz returning—there would be no help there.

She looked again at her husband. The old man was wrapping his face and head in voluminous scarves, until only his iron-grey beard and the tip of his red hooked nose were visible.

He saw her and came toward her, leading the horse, and she obeyed his signal without a word, and mounted. Walking ahead he kept his hand on the bridle and she noticed that he took a path that was at right angles to the main road to Tangier.

Once or twice he looked back, first at the house and then the swift-moving party of horsemen which were now in view. It was Sadi—Joan recognised the figure riding at the head of the party. And she saw, too, that each man carried a rifle.

Suddenly the beggar changed direction, moved parallel with the cavalcade, as far as she could guess, for they were now out of sight and mounting the hill toward a point which would bring them clear of the gardens. From the anxious glances he shot backward, she guessed that he was in some fear lest Hamon, in a saner moment, had relented his mad folly. He walked the horse down to the bed of a hill stream and followed its tortuous windings, keeping the horse in the shallow waters. Suddenly she heard a shot, and then another. The sound re-echoed from the hills, and she looked down at the old man anxiously.

"What was that?" she asked in Spanish.

He shook his head without looking round.

Again came a shot, and then she guessed the reason. The shots were to attract the attention of the beggar and to recall him, and he evidently had the same view, for he jerked the reins of the horse and the animal broke into a trot, the beggar running nimbly by his animal's head.

They came to a little wood of pines and he brought the horse up the steep slope into its cover, and, signalling her to wait, he went back on foot. It was nearly half-an-hour before he returned, and then, holding up his hand, he lifted her from the saddle and she closed her eyes that she might not see his face. After a time he brought her water from the stream, and opening a little bundle, displayed food, but she was too tired to do any more than drink the cold, refreshing liquid. So tired, that, when she lay down upon the rug he spread, she forgot her terrible danger, forgot the trick of fate that had made her the wife of a beggar and fell instantly into a sound and dreamless sleep.

Ralph Hamon sat, crouched in his bedroom, his nails at his teeth, feeling weak and ill. The mad gust of temper that had driven him to such an act of lunacy had passed, leaving him shaking in every limb. From his window he could see the beg-

gar carrying the girl down the hill, and at the sight he started to his feet with a hoarse cry of rage. That folly could be remedied and quickly.

There was a man amongst his servants who had been his pensioner for years, an old man, grizzled and grey, and he sent for him.

"Ahab," he said, "you know the beggar who rides the horse?"

"Yes, lord."

"He has taken with him at this moment the lady of my heart. Go bring her back and give the old man this money." He took a handful of notes from his pocket and put them into the eager palm of his servitor. "If he gives you trouble—kill him."

Ralph went up to his bedroom to watch his emissary go through the gates, and then for the first time he saw the party of mounted men winding their way up the hillside.

"Sadi," he said under his breath and guessed what that visit signified.

It was too late to recall his messenger and he ran down to the gates to welcome his some-time agent. Sadi Hafiz threw himself from his horse and his tone and mien were changed. He was no longer the polite and polished product of the mission school. He was the Moorish chieftain, insolent, overbearing, unsmiling.

"You know why I've come, Hamon," he said, his hands on his hips, his feet apart, his big head thrust forward. "Where is the girl? I want her. I presume you are not married, but, if you are, it makes very little difference."

"I am not married," said Hamon, "but she is!"

"What do you mean?"

He was not left long in doubt.

"My lady expressed a preference for a beggar. She said she would rather marry the old man who asked for alms than marry me—her wish has been fulfilled."

Sadi's eyes were slits.

"They were married half-an-hour ago and are there." He took in the country with a gesture.

"You're lying, Hamon," said the other steadily. "That story doesn't deceive me. I shall search your house as Morlake searched mine."

Hamon said nothing. There were twenty armed men behind Sadi and at a word from their leader he was a dead man.

"You're at liberty to search the house from harem to kitchen," he said coolly, and the Moor strode past him.

He could not have had time to make a very complete inspection, for he was back again almost immediately.

"I've spoken to your servants, who tell me that what you have said is true. Which way did she go?"

Hamon pointed and the Moor gave an order to his men. One of the horsemen fired in the air. A second and a third shot followed.

"If that does not bring him back we will go and look for him," said Sadi grimly.

"So far as I am concerned," Ralph shrugged his shoulders —"you may do as you wish. My interest in the lady has evaporated."

He was not speaking the truth, but his manner deceived the Moor.

"You were a fool to let her go," he said more mildly.

"If I hadn't let her go, you would probably have persuaded me," said Hamon, and Sadi's slow smile confirmed his suspicion.

A minute later the party was riding down the hill, scattering left and right in an endeavour to pick up the trail of the beggar and his wife. Hamon watched them before he returned to the house, to gather the pieces of his scattered dreams and discover which of the fragments had a solid value.

From an inside pocket he took a black leather case and, emptying the contents, laid them on the table and examined them one by one. The last of these possessions was an oblong document, covered with fine writing. Hindhead seemed far away—Hindhead and Jim Morlake and the prying Welling, and Creith, with its avenues and meadowlands. He knew the document by heart, but he read it again:

Believing that Ralph Hamon, who I thought was my friend, designs my death, I wish to explain the circumstances under which I find myself a prisoner in a little house overlooking Hindhead. Acting on the representations and on the advice of Hamon, I went to Morocco to inspect a mine, which I believed to be his property. We returned to London secretly, again on his advice, for he said it would be fatal to his plans if it were known that he was transferring any of his interests in the mine. Having a suspicion that the property, which he stated was his, had in reality nothing whatever to do with his company, I went to Hindhead, determined not to part with my money, until he could assure me that I was mistaken. I took a precaution which I believed and still believe is effective. At Hindhead my suspicions were confirmed and I refused to part with the money. He locked me up in the kitchen under the guardianship of a Moor whom he had brought back from Tangier with him. An attempt has already been made, and I fear the next——

Here the writing ended abruptly. He rolled up the damning charge and, returning it to his pocket-book with the other contents, slipped it into his inside pocket again. And, as he did so, he recalled Jim Morlake's description. The monkey's hand was in the gourd and he had come to the place where he could not release the fruit.

In the meantime, one of Sadi's men had picked up the track of footprints, and Sadi and two of the party had reached the edge of the stream.

"Leave your horses and come on foot," he ordered.

They followed the course of the stream downward until it was clear to the shereef that they could not have gone in that direction. From thereon, he had a view of the country. Moreover, they passed a particularly shallow stretch with a sandy bottom and there were no marks of hoofs.

"We will go back," he said, and led the way.

An hour's walk brought them to a place where the stream ran between high banks, and here the Moor's quick eyes saw the new marks of horse's feet, and he signalled his men to

silence. With remarkable agility he ran up the bank and crept forward . . .

Joan woke from her sleep to meet the dark eyes of Sadi Hafiz looking down at her.

"Where is your friend?" asked Sadi, stooping to assist her to her feet.

She looked round, still dazed with sleep.

"My friend? You mean Abdul?"

"So you know his name," said Sadi pleasantly.

"What do you want with me?" she asked.

"I am taking you with me to Tangier, to your friends," he said, but she knew he was lying.

Looking round, she saw no sign of the beggar. His horse still grazed beneath a tree, but the old man had disappeared. Sadi sent one of his people to bring in the animal, and helped her to mount.

"I was terribly worried," he said in his excellent English, "when our friend Hamon told me the stupid thing he had done. There are times when Hamon is crazy and I am very angry with him. You like Morocco, Lady Joan?"

"Not very much," she said, and he chuckled.

"I don't suppose you do." He looked up at her admiringly. "How well the Moorish costume suits you! It might have been designed for your adornment."

A trick he had of using pretentious words that would at any other time have amused her. He walked by her side, one of his riflemen leading the horse, and after a while they came to a place where they had taken the stream. The remainder of his party were waiting for him, sitting on the bank, and at a signal they mounted.

"Perhaps it is as well I did not meet your husband," said Sadi ominously. "I trust he has not given you any trouble?"

She was not in the mood for conversation and she answered curtly enough and he seemed amused. No time was lost. She was lifted from the beggar's horse to a beautiful roan that had evidently been brought specially for her and she could not help reflecting on the certainty that, even if Ralph had married her, she would still have ridden on that horse before the day

was through. Sadi Hafiz had come to take her back with him to his little house in the hollow, married or unmarried.

He rode by her side most of the day, talking pleasantly of people and things, and she was surprised at the wideness and catholicity of his knowledge.

"I was agent for Hamon in Tangier, and I suppose you have an idea that I was a sort of superior servant," he said. "But it suited me to act for him. He is a man without scruple or gratitude."

That was a sentiment which she thought came ill from Sadi Hafiz.

Before sunset they halted and made a camp. In spite of the coldness of the night, the men prepared to sleep in the open, wrapped in their woollen cloaks, but for the girl a tent was taken from the pack-horse and pitched in the most sheltered position Sadi could find.

"We will rest here until midnight," he said. "I must reach my destination before daybreak."

She lay wide awake, listening to the talk and watching the shadow of the smoking fires that the sunset threw on the thin walls of the tent, and then the talk gradually died down. There was no sound but an occasional whinny from a horse. She looked at the watch on her wrist, the one article of jewellery she had retained. It was nine o'clock. She had three hours left in which she could make her escape.

She drew aside the curtain of the little tent and, looking out, saw a dark figure—a sentry, she guessed. Escape was impossible that way. She tried to lift the curtain at the back of the tent, but it was pegged down tightly. Working her hand through under the curtain she groped around for the peg and presently found it. It took all her power to loosen it, but after a while, with a supreme effort, she pulled it from the earth and, exerting all her strength, she lifted the curtain a little farther and got her head beneath, and, by dint of perseverance, wriggled clear.

Ahead of her were impenetrable thorn bushes. She crept round the outside of the tent, conscious that her white dress would be detected if the sentry turned his head. And then she

found an opening in the undergrowth and wriggled through. At the sound of cracking twigs the sentry turned and shouted something in Arabic. And now, desperate, the girl rose to her feet and ran. She could hardly see a yard before her; once she ran into a dwarf tree and fell momentarily stunned, but was on her feet again immediately. The moon was just rising and showed her a sparsely wooded stretch of plain; but it also revealed her to her pursuers.

The camp was now in an uproar. She heard shouts and the bellowing voice of Sadi Hafiz, and the clatter of horses' hoofs. It was Sadi himself who was coming after her. She knew it was he without seeing him, and, terrified, she increased her speed. But she could not hope to outpace the horse. Nearer and nearer he came, and then with a thunder of hoofs the horseman swept past her and turned.

"Oh no, my little rose!" he said exultantly. "That is not the way to happiness!"

He reached over and caught at her cloak and, swinging himself from the saddle, he caught her in his arms.

"This night I live!" he cried hoarsely.

"This night you die!"

He turned in a flash to confront the aged beggar and dropped his hand to the folds of his *jellab*.

Joan Carston stood, rooted to the spot, staring at the newcomer. She looked at the hideous face of Abdul Azim, but it was the voice of Jim Morlake that had spoken!

CHAPTER LXII

The Escape

Two shots rang out together, and Sadi Hafiz went to his knees with a groan and fell sideways.

"Get on to that horse, quick," said Jim, and almost threw her into the saddle.

He was up behind her in a second.

"Jim!" she whispered, and the arm that encircled her increased its pressure.

Burdened as he was, the big horse strode out freely, and Jim, looking over his shoulder, saw that the white figures that had followed Sadi from the camp had halted to succour their fallen chief.

"We've got ten minutes' start of them, anyway," he said, "and with any luck we ought to miss them."

Wisely, he left the direction to the horse, who would know the country, and whose eyes would detect the pitfalls and barriers in which the plain abounded. There was no sign now of pursuers, but Jim was without illusions. If Sadi Hafiz was capable of issuing orders, there would be no dropping of the pursuit. After an hour's travelling the horse gave evidence of his weariness, and Jim dropped from the saddle and went to his head.

"There used to be a guard house on the coast," he said, "though I don't know that a Moorish guard is much more companionable than the gentleman we have left behind."

She was looking down at him, trying to recognise, in the unpleasant face, one vestige of the Jim she knew.

"It *is* you?"

"Oh yes, it is I," he laughed. "The make-up is good? It is an old character of mine, and if Sadi had had the sense of a rabbit, he would have remembered the fact. The nose is the difficulty," he added ruefully. "The wax gets warm in the sun and has to be remodelled, but the rest is easy."

"But you have no teeth," she said, catching a glimpse of the black cavity of his mouth.

"They're there, somewhere," he said carelessly. "A toothbrush and a cake of soap will make a whole lot of difference to me, Joan."

He heard her gasp.

"What is the matter?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing," she said, and then: "How funny!"

"If your sense of humour is returning, my young friend, you're on the high road to safety!"

Before daybreak they halted near a spring and unsaddled and watered the horse.

"I'm afraid I can give you nothing to eat," said Jim. "The only thing I can do——"

He stripped off his jellab and unfastened his ragged shirt and produced from a pocket a small waterproof bag and carried it to the stream.

He went down a hideous old man; he came back Jim Morlake, and she could only sit and look at him.

"This is a dream," she said decidedly. "I shall wake up presently and find myself——" she shuddered.

"You'll hardly be any more awake than you are at this moment," said Jim. "We are within two miles of the coast, and unless friend Sadi has given very emphatic orders, his men will not follow us to the guard-house."

His estimate proved to be correct; they did not see a white cloak again, and reached the guard-house to find it in charge, as Jim had suspected, of a Spanish officer; for they had reached that territory which Spain regarded as within the sphere of her influence.

"From here, we shall have to follow the coast-line and take a chance," said Jim, after interviewing the officer. "The Spaniards can't give us an escort to Tangier for political reasons —the French are rather jealous of their neighbours crossing the line, but I don't think we shall be molested."

They made camp that night almost within view of the lights of Tangier. Jim had borrowed blankets from the Spanish outpost and spread them for the girl under the ruin of an old Moorish post.

"By the way," he said, as he bade her good-night, before retiring himself to the windy side of the wall, "this morning, you said something was very funny—what was it?"

"I'm not going to tell you," said Joan firmly.

As she settled down to sleep, she wondered whether the ceremony of the morning had been legal and binding—and fervently hoped that it had.

CHAPTER LXIII

The End of Sadi

THEY brought Sadi Hafiz to the house on the hill and the journey was a long one for a man with a bullet in his shoulder. The first news Ralph had of the happening was a thundering knock at the gates which roused him from a fitful sleep and sent him to his window.

The gates were locked and barred and could not be opened without his permission. He saw the gleam of lanterns outside, and presently a shrill voice called him by name and he knew it was Sadi. Hurrying downstairs, he joined the suspicious gatekeeper, who was parleying through the barred wicket.

"Let them enter," he said, and himself lifted one of the bars.

A glance at Sadi told him that something serious had happened and he assisted the wounded man into the house.

"Allah, I am finished!" groaned Sadi. "That pig. If that pistol had not caught in the folds of my cloak he would have been in hell to-night!"

Hamon sent for a woman and in the meantime examined the wound.

"It is nothing," said Sadi roughly. "The last time he shot me was more serious."

"The last time he shot you?" repeated Hamon dully.

Sadi had noticed a peculiar development in the man, which was not altogether explained in his changed appearance. He seemed to be thinking of something so intently that he had no time to interest himself in the events of the moment.

"What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," said Hamon, coming out of his reverie. "You were saying . . . ?"

"I was saying that the last time he shot me was more serious."

"Who shot you, anyway?" asked Hamon. "Not the beggar?"

"The beggar," repeated the other grimly.

Here conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the woman whom the Moorish girl had called Señora Hamon. She carried a large bowl of water and cloths and Hamon watched her unseeingly while she dressed the wound. When she had gone, he took up the thread of the conversation.

"I never thought he would do you much harm," he said, "he is very old and feeble—you did not tell me that you knew him."

"I did not know that I knew him," replied the Moor, "or that you knew him. But Mr. Morlake is an old enemy of mine!"

With a start Hamon came to himself.

"You were speaking about the beggar, weren't you?" he said, frowning. "I'm so rattled and muddled to-night. You were talking of the old beggar man, Abdul."

"I'm talking about Mr. Morlake," said the other between his teeth. "The gentleman you so considerately married to your woman this morning!"

"Oh!" said Hamon blankly.

The tidings were too tremendous for him to take in. He passed his hand wearily before his eyes.

"I don't get it," he said haltingly. "The beggar was Morlake, you say? But how could he be? He was an old man——"

"If I'd had the eyes of a mole," said the other bitterly, "I'd have known it was Morlake. It was his favourite disguise when he was in the Intelligence Service in Morocco."

Hamon sat down on the divan where the man was lying.

"The beggar was Morlake," he said stupidly. "Let me get that in my mind. And I married them!"

He burst into a fit of laughter and Sadi, with his knowledge of men, saw how near his host was to a breakdown. Presently he calmed himself.

"Did he get her? Of course he did. He took her from you and shot you. Oh God! What a fool I was!"

"He hates you," said the Moor after a long interval of silence. "What is behind it?"

"He wants something I have—that is behind it." The flushed face and the slurred voice aroused Sadi's suspicion. Had the man been drinking?"

As though he read Sadi's mind, Hamon said:

"You think I'm drunk, don't you, but I'm not. I was never more sober. I'm just——" he hesitated to find a word, "well, I feel differently, that is all."

He made one of his abrupt exits, leaving Sadi to nurse his wound and to ponder on a development which brought almost as much unease to his mind as did his wound to his body. Hamon must go, he decided coldbloodedly. If it was true that there was an English police officer looking for him in Tangier, then the policeman must have his prey. Only in that way could Sadi be rehabilitated in the eyes of his many employers. Hamon had ceased to be profitable; was nearing the end of his financial tether. The shrewd Moor weighed up the situation with unerring judgment. He did not sleep, his shoulder was too painful; and soon after sunrise he went in search of his host.

Hamon was in the room that the girl had occupied. He at any rate had found forgetfulness, and on the table, where his head rested on folded arms, was an open pocket-book and a scatter of papers. Sadi examined them furtively.

There were half a dozen negotiable bank drafts, made out to "Mr. Jackson Brown," and there was also a white paper folded in four . . .

Hamon awakened and lifted his head slowly. The Moor was reading, and:

"That is mine, when you've done with it," said Hamon.

In no way disconcerted, Sadi dropped the papers on the table.

"So that is it? I wondered what you were scared of. You're a fool; that paper would hang you. Why don't you burn it?"

"Who told you to read it?" asked the other and his eyes were like live coals. "Who asked you to sneak in here and spy on me, Sadi?"

"You're a fool. I'm in pain and bored. I came in to talk to you, expecting to find you in bed."

Ralph was slowly gathering his property together.

"It was my fault, for leaving it around," he said. "Now you know."

Sadi nodded.

"Why don't vou destroy it?" he asked.

"Because I won't, I won't!" snarled the other, and pushed the case savagely into his pocket.

He followed Sadi with his eyes as the Moor strolled out of the room and sat motionless, staring at the door and fingering his lip.

Toward the evening, he saw one of Sadi's men mount his horse, and, leading another, go down the hillside. That could only mean one thing: the messenger was riding to Tangier without drawing rein except to change his horse. And he could only be riding to Tangier on one errand. Ralph Hamon chuckled. For some reason the discovery afforded him intense amusement. Sadi Hafiz was saving his own skin at his expense. In two days—to-morrow perhaps—authorisation would come through from the Sultan's representative, and he, Ralph Hamon, would be seized by the man whom he had befriended, and carried into Tangier, there to be extradited to stand his trial for—what?

He drew a long whistling breath. His hand unconsciously touched the case in his pocket. There were no safes to hide it there, no strong boxes, and yet a match, one of a hundred from a ten-centimos box, would relieve him of all danger. And he did not, would not, could not burn the accursed thing. He was well enough acquainted with himself to know that he was physically incapable of that last drastic act.

At the back of the house were his own stables, and the grooms' quarters. He strolled round casually and called the head groom to him.

"I'm going on a journey to-night, but it is secret. You will bring your horse and mine to the river where the road crosses —we'll go to the coast and afterward into Spanish territory. There is a thousand pesetas for you and yet another thousand if you are a discreet man."

"Lord, you have sewn up my mouth with threads of gold," said the man poetically.

Hamon went into Sadi's room to take dinner with him and was unusually cheerful.

"Do you think they will reach Tangier?" he asked.

"That is certain," said Sadi, "but I have as good a tale as any

I told her I was taking her back to her friends. I did not harm her in any way and I think I will be able to satisfy the consulate that the young lady was alarmed for no good reason. The beggar I shot at—why? Because I do not know that he is Mr. Morlake. To me he is an evil old thief from whom I am rescuing the lady. Yes, the consulates will accept my story."

"And do you think *I* shall be able to satisfy the consulates?" asked Hamon, fixing his blazing eyes on the wounded man.

Sadi shrugged his shoulder and winced with the pain of it.

"You are a rich man and powerful," he said diplomatically. "I am a poor Moor, at the mercy of foreigners. To-morrow I will go back to Tangier," he said, "and you?"

"To-morrow I also may go to Tangier," said Hamon, not moving his eyes from the other, and he saw him shift uncomfortably.

"These things are with God," said the philosophical Sadi.

The household went to bed early. Sadi's men had been accommodated within the walls—a course which satisfied their chieftain. Midnight was striking on the little clock in the drawing-room when Hamon, dressed for riding, and wearing a thick coat that reached to his knees, came down the stone stairs to the hall. He wore rubbers over his shoes and made no sound as, creeping to the door of the room where Sadi was sleeping, he turned the handle softly. Only a candle burnt to give light to the sick man and Hamon stood, listening in the open doorway, till he heard the regular breathing of the sleeper. Then he drew a long, straight knife from his pocket and went into the room. He was only there a few minutes, and then the candle was extinguished and he came out.

He rode hard for two hours and halted whilst his groom heated some water and prepared a meal, and in the light of the dancing fire, the man said in alarm:

"Lord, there is blood on your sleeve and on your hands."

"That is nothing," said Hamon calmly. "This morning a dog of my house would have bitten me, so I killed him."

CHAPTER LXIV

A Moorish Woman's Return

SUNLIGHT bathed Tangier in a yellow flood, the surface of the bay was a mass of glittering gold; and all that could please the eye was there for their admiration; but the two elderly men who leant over the balustrade of the terrace saw no beauty in the scene; for the heart of one was breaking, and Welling's ached in sympathy.

The Cadiz mail was in the bay, a black, long-funnelled steamer, that at that moment was taking on the passengers who had been rowed out from the quay.

"I told her I couldn't come down to see her off, so she won't be very much disappointed," said Welling.

"Who? Lydia Hamon?"

Welling nodded.

"She'll be glad to see the last of Tangier." A pause. "That girl has the makings of a good woman."

"All women have," said Lord Creith quietly. "At least, that has been my experience."

Welling sniffed sceptically.

"There is no news, I suppose?"

Lord Creith shook his head. His eyes wandered to the stately yacht that lay at anchor in the bay.

"You'll wait here until you hear something?" suggested Welling.

"I suppose so," listlessly. "And you?"

"My work is practically done," said Welling, pulling thoughtfully at his cigar. "I came out to get the beginnings of Hamon, and I've pretty well cleaned up the obscurity of his start. He was a floater of fake companies, and was moderately successful until he brought a strange Englishman out here, a man of some wealth. They lived at the house of Sadi Hafiz and were here together for about a fortnight, when the Englishman and Hamon left together. I have discovered that the

stranger paid him a very considerable sum of money—I have been round to the Credit Lyonnais, who have turned up the records. The transaction is very clear; the sum paid was fifty thousand pounds on account."

"On account of what?" asked Lord Creith, interested in spite of his trouble.

"That is what I want to know. Apparently a still larger sum was to be paid, but it certainly did not go into Hamon's account here."

"You don't know the name of this mysterious Englishman?"

The old man shook his head.

"I don't, but I guess the money was paid. I should say the final payment was made in the vicinity of Hindhead—if I could only be sure of that, Hamon would not show his nose in Tangier again."

"He won't anyway," said Creith bitterly. "By heavens, Welling, if the government of this infernal country doesn't do something by to-morrow, I'm going to raise an expedition and go into the interior to find my girl! And the day I meet Ralph Hamon will be his last!"

Welling sucked at his cigar, his eyes fixed upon the sunlit waters.

"If Jim Morlake can't find her, you won't," he said.

"Where has he gone?" wailed Creith. "It is the uncertainty about him that is holding me back."

"Nobody knows. That English dope-fiend that lives at the tailor's where, I have discovered, Morlake has a room, has been away from Tangier for two days. He came back last night. I've got a feeling that he's in the business, but when I tried to talk with him, he was too sleepy to snore!"

Two people were riding along the beach toward the town. They were less than half-a-mile away, but were conspicuous by reason of their unseemly animation.

"You don't often see a Moorish man and woman carrying on a bright conversation in public, do you?" said Welling, watching.

"Is the smaller one a woman?" asked Creith.

"I guess so; she is sitting side-saddle."

Lord Creith fixed his glass and peered at the two, and then the woman raised a hand and waved, and it seemed that the greeting was for him.

"Are they signalling to us?"

"It looks like it," said Welling.

Lord Creith's face had gone suddenly pale.

"It can't be," he said in a tremulous voice. Then, turning, he ran down the steps across the beach road on to the sands, and the two riders turned their steeds in the direction and kicked them into a gallop.

Welling watched the scene dumfounded. He saw the Moorish woman suddenly leap from the saddle into the arms of the bareheaded old man and then the bigger Moor got down, to be greeted warmly.

"If that is not Jim Morlake, I'm a Dutchman," said Welling.

In another instant he was flying across the sands to meet them. A crowd of Moors had watched the unseemly behaviour of the unveiled woman and stared painfully at her outrageous conduct.

"I don't care," said Joan hilariously. "I feel drunk with happiness."

In an hour four happy people sat down to the first square meal two of them had taken in days. Welling went away after lunch and came back in an hour with the news that the *basha* had sent a posse to arrest Hamon on information laid by Sadi Hafiz.

"Which means that Sadi, having saved his life, is now rapidly saving his skin," said Jim. "In a sense I'm glad I didn't kill him." He turned to Lord Creith. "You are going to get Lady Joan out of this very quickly, aren't you?"

"We sail this evening," said his lordship fervently, "and if there is a gale in the channel and the seas of the Bay of Biscay are mountains high, I'm heading straight for Southampton. I would go home by the nearest route," he added, "and let the yacht find its way back without my assistance, but the real owner is a personal friend of mine. You're coming too, Morlake?"

Jim shook his head.

"Not yet," he said quietly. "I came out here with two objects. One is to a great extent fulfilled; the other remains."

"You mean Hamon?"

He nodded.

"I'm certainly not going to leave you here, my good man," said Joan with spirit. "I have an especial right to demand that you will return with us!"

But on this point Jim was obdurate. The day after the yacht sailed, he received news of the death of Sadi Hafiz and the murderer's flight, and cursed himself for not following his heart. He flew over to Cadiz by military aeroplane, in the hope of picking up the yacht at that port, but even as the aeroplane was crossing the coast line, he saw the *L'Esperance* steaming out. He caught the afternoon train to Madrid, and was on the quay at Southampton to welcome them. And Joan did not see the man she loved until another month had passed, for Jim Morlake had been seized with a sudden shyness and a doubt had come to his mind which had developed into an obsession.

CHAPTER LXV

The Reverend Gentleman

"HANIMALS are hanimals," said the aggrieved Binger. "They 'ave their places, the same as everything helse."

"They may have their places, but if you kick my dog," said Jim Morlake, "I shall kick you!"

"If you kick me, sir," said Binger witn dignity, "I shall hoffer my resignation."

Jim laughed and caressed the lame terrier who was showing his teeth at the valet.

"A hanimal's place is in the country, sir, if you'll excuse me."

"I won't excuse you, Binger," said Jim good-humouredly. "Get out."

He filled his pipe and sat back in the deep chair, scanning the evening newspaper and the terrier, who had resented the gentle kick which Binger had delivered because of a certain missing mutton-bone, put his head between his paws and went to sleep.

Presently Jim put down his newspaper, went to the bookshelf in his bedroom and brought back a large atlas. He turned the pages until he came to the coast line of Morocco and with a pencil he traced the possible avenues of escape that might lie open to a hunted murderer. He was in the midst of this occupation when Welling came.

"Planning out a honeymoon trip?" he asked pleasantly and Jim flushed.

"I am not contemplating a honeymoon trip," he said a little stiffly.

"Then you're wasting a perfectly good atlas," said the calm detective, laying his hat carefully over the head of the sleeping dog. "Your man is alive."

"Hamon?" asked Jim quickly.

The detective nodded.

"Two bank drafts have been cashed, both in Tangier, for a considerable sum. They were made payable to Hamon in a fictitious name—I only discovered the fact yesterday when I went to one of his banks. Hamon had several accounts running, and it was rather difficult to discover them all; but when I did get on to the right track I made that discovery. The drafts have been honoured—in fact, they're back in England."

Jim looked serious.

"Then he got to Tangier?"

"Undoubtedly, but that would be easy. I am willing to accept your theory that he got through to the Spanish territory. From Tetuan to Tangier is only a step. I think one of the Gibraltar steamers calls at both ports."

"He'll stay there if he is wise."

"But he isn't wise," said Welling. "It is dangerous enough for him in Tangier. He'll be tried for the murder of Sadi Hafiz if he is detected. The mere fact that he has drawn this money

seems to me to be pretty convincing proof that he's shaking Tangier at the earliest opportunity—probably he is away by now. It is rather curious to see you fiddling with that atlas. I was doing exactly the same thing this morning, guessing the lines he took——"

"Which would be——?"

"Gibraltar-Genoa, or Gibraltar-Naples. Genoa or Naples to New York or New Orleans. New York or New Orleans to London, or maybe Cadiz and a banana boat to Thames River—*that's* more likely."

"You think he'll come here!" asked Jim in surprise.

"Certainly," said the other. "And what is more, we shall never take him."

Jim put down his atlas and leant back in his chair.

"You mean you'll never capture him?" he asked in surprise.

The detective shook his head.

"We may capture him, though at present we've no evidence worth the gum on a penny stamp," he said, "but he'll never hang. Because he is mad, Morlake! I've seen the report of the doctor who examined Sadi Hafiz after he was found, and I can tell you, as a student of medical jurisprudence, that Ralph Hamon is the third lunatic I've met in this case."

Jim lit his pipe again.

"Am I one?" he asked ironically.

"No, there have been three, but you haven't been one. The first was Farringdon, who was undoubtedly mad; the second was Bannockwaite, who is also mad but not dangerous; the third is Hamon, who is the worst of the lot."

Jim Morlake pondered as he recalled the characteristics of the men.

"Bannockwaite is the maddest of the lot," he said at last.

"He has left Tangier," nodded Welling. "The British Minister gave him twenty-four hours to quit, for some reason, which I haven't discovered, but which was probably due to your representation. He went over to Algeciras, but the Spanish people sent him packing. He was in Paris until yesterday. He is in London to-night."

"How do you know?" asked Jim in surprise.

"I had him tailed from the station. He is living in a little lodging in Stamford Street, Blackfriars."

Jim was not sufficiently curious to enquire much about the decadent minister, but now he learnt for the first time that Bannockwaite was practically penniless at the time when he was supposed to have died. He had run through a large fortune, scattering his money lavishly. His only income was from a group of houses the rents of which had been left to him by a maternal aunt in the days when he was so wealthy that he had regarded the legacy with something like contempt. These had been overlooked by him in the final squandering of his patrimony, and when he would have sold them the estate was fortunately in bankruptcy. Enough had been realised to clear his debts, but the administration of this little property remained in the trustee's hands.

"A remarkable fellow," said Welling, shaking his head. "He built three churches, endowed an orphanage, and brought more souls to the verge of hell than any living man."

Welling was on his way home. He had lately got into the habit of calling at the flat in Bond Street.

"Why don't you go back to Wold House?" he asked.

"I prefer this place for the time being. It is rather cold in the country," Jim excused himself lamely.

"What are you afraid of?" asked the detective contemptuously. "A bit of a girl!"

"I'm afraid of nothing," said Jim, going red.

"You're afraid of Joan Carston, my lad," and he spoke the truth.

Jim saw him out and went back to his pipe and his atlas, but now he had no interest in tracing possible routes, and closing the book returned it to the shelf.

Yes, he was afraid of Joan Carston—afraid of what she might feel and think; afraid that, in her less emotional moments, she would feel he had taken advantage of his disguise and sneaked into matrimony—that was his own expression. He was afraid that the marriage was not legal—equally afraid that it was. He might have accepted one of Joan's invitations, that grew colder and colder with repetition, and gone down to

Creith House and talked it over with her, but he had shirked the meeting. He heard the front door bell ring and Binger came in.

"There's a man wants to see you, sir."

"What sort of a man?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, my hown impression is that he's hintoxicated."

"What sort of a man?" asked Jim again.

"He's what I call the himage of a chronic boozer."

Jim looked at him and past him.

"Did he give his name?"

"Bannockburn is his name," said Binger impressively. "In my opinion it is a put-up job. Shall I say you're hout?"

"No," said Jim, "he might misunderstand you. Ask your Mr. Bannockburn to come in—by the way, his name is Bannockwaite."

"It sounds like a piece of hartfulness to me," said Binger and showed the man into the room.

There was very little improvement in the appearance of the marrying clergyman. He carried himself a little more jauntily, his manner was perhaps less aggressive. He wore a collar and a tie, the former of which had probably been in use since his return to London.

"Good evening, Morlake," he said with a sprightly wave of his hand. "I think we have met before."

"Won't you sit down," said Jim gravely. "Put a chair for Mr. Bannockwaite."

Binger obeyed with a grimace of distaste.

"And close the door tight," said Jim significantly, and Binger bridled as he went out.

"I got your address from a mutual friend."

"In other words, a telephone directory," said Jim. "I do not know that we have any mutual friends except Abdullah the tailor of Tangier. An excellent fellow!"

The wreck of a man fixed his glass in his eye and beamed benevolently on Jim.

"A limited but an excellent fellow. The industry of the Moor is a constant source of wonder to me." He stroked his uneven

red beard and looked approvingly round the apartment. "It is delightful, perfectly delightful," he murmured. "A touch of old Morocco! I specially admire the ceiling."

Jim was wondering what was the object of the visit, but was not long left in doubt.

"I performed a little service for you, Mr. Morlake," said Bannockwaite with an airy wave of his swollen hand. "A mere trifle, but in these hard times, *necessitas non habet legem*. At the moment I was not aware that we had such a distinguished —er—client, but it has since transpired, though I have not advertised the fact, that the unprepossessing bridegroom was none other than the very interesting and—if I may be excused the impertinence—the very good-looking gentleman who is sitting before me.

"To turn my sacred calling into commerce is repugnant to all my finer feelings, but a man of your financial standing will not object to a mere trifle of five guineas. I could make an even larger sum if I wrote a little account, one of those frothy, epigrammatical soufflés of literature with which my name was associated at Oxford, and through the good offices of my friend of the editor of the *Megaphone*——"

"In other words, if I don't pay your fee of five guineas, you're going to broadcast the fact that I married Lady Joan Carston?"

"That would be blackmail," murmured the other and smiled jovially. "No, no, I will tell you candidly, *intra muros*, that I am too lazy to write. My dear fellow, I will be perfectly candid with you—I have no intention of writing," and again he beamed.

Jim took a note from his pocket and passed it across the table.

"Mr. Bannockwaite, I often wonder whether you think?"

"I beg your pardon?" The man leant forward with an exaggerated gesture of politeness, his hand to his ear.

"Whether I think?" he repeated. "My dear fellow, why should I think? I ask you, in the name of heaven, why I *should* think? I live for the moment. If the moment is good, I am happy; if it is bad, I sorrow. I have lived that way all my life."

"You have no regrets?" asked Jim wonderingly.

The man pocketed the note, smacked his lips and smiled.

"I shall see you again," he said, rising.

"If you call again, I will have you thrown out," said Jim without heat. "I hate to say it to a man of your surpassing intellect, but you are altogether horrible."

The visitor threw back his head and laughed, with such heartiness that Binger opened the door and stared in.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you lack something in philosophy. I wish you a very good evening."

When the door closed upon him, Jim rang the bell for Binger.

"Open the windows and air the room," he said.

"I should jolly well say so," said the indignant Binger.

"Then jolly well don't," snapped Jim.

He looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock and he was conscious that he had not dined. Binger was a bad cook and Mahmet had not returned from Casa Bianca. To avoid starvation or indigestion, Jim patronised a little restaurant in Soho, but to-night he craved for dishes that were home-made, and the very thought of the rich fare that awaited him in Soho made him feel ill. Home dishes, served in a big old-fashioned dining-room, with a fire crackling on the hearth, the rustle of bare boughs in the garden outside, a frozen lawn, and a river where little fishes leapt. He rang the bell.

"Telephone through to Cleaver and say I'm coming down to-night. Let him get me a large joint of juicy beef, with a mountainous pie to follow. And beer."

"To-night, sir?" said Binger incredulously. "It's height o'clock."

"I don't care if it is heighty," said Jim. "Get me my coat."

Soon he was speeding through the night, the cold wind rasping his cheeks. This was better than Tangier; better than warm breezes and sunny skies were these scurrying clouds that showed glimpses of the moon. There was a smell of snow in the air; a speck fell against his wind-screen and on the south side of Horsham it was snowing fast. The hedges were patched with white and the road revealed by his headlamps began to disap-

pear under a fleecy carpet. His heart leapt at the sight of it. It could not be too cold, too snowy, too rainy, too anything—the country was the only place. There was something wrong about people who wanted to live in town all the year round, and especially in winter. Amongst the attractions of the country he did not think of Joan; yet, if he had thought of the country without her, it would have been drear indeed.

Cleaver greeted him with just that amount of pompousness that Jim enjoyed and took his wet coat from him.

"Dinner is ready, sir. Shall I serve?"

"If you please, Cleaver," said Jim. "Everything quiet here?"

"Everything, sir. A hayrick caught fire at Sunning Farm——"

"Oh, blow the hayrick!" said Jim. "Is that all the excitement you've had here since I've been away?"

"I think so, sir," said Cleaver gravely. "The tortoise-shell cat has given birth to four kittens and the price of coal has risen owing to the strike, but, beyond that, very little has happened. The country is very dull."

"Are you another of those dull-country people, my man?" said Jim gaily, as he rubbed his hands before the log fire. "Well, get that out of your head! It came on me to-night, Cleaver, that the country is the only place where a man can live. I'll have a fire in my bedroom, and turn on every light in the study, let up the shades and open the shutters."

Joan, going to bed, looked out of the window as was her practice, and saw the illumination.

"Oh, you have come back, have you!" she said softly, and kissed her finger-tips to the lights.

CHAPTER LXVI

A Luncheon Party

"WHAT is worrying me," said Lord Creith at breakfast, "is the future of this wretched estate."

"Why, Daddy?" she asked.

"What is going to happen, supposing this horrible scoundrel is arrested and tried and hanged, as very probably he will be? Who inherits Creith House?"

That had not occurred to her.

"His sister, I suppose," she said, after a moment's thought.

"Exactly," said Lord Creith, "and we're as badly off as ever we were! I'm jiggered in this matter, my dear, absolutely jiggered!"

"Have you actually sold the property?"

"N-no," said his lordship. "What I gave Hamon was a sort of extravagant mortgage."

"What kind of mortgage is that?" she asked, smiling.

"Well, he gave me a sum which it is humanly impossible that I could ever pay back, so that foreclosure sooner or later is inevitable, in exchange for which I received the tenancy for life."

He mentioned a sum which took her breath away.

"Did he pay you all that money?" she said in awe. "Why, Daddy, what did you do with it?"

Lord Creith tactfully changed the subject.

"I gather Jim Morlake is back," he said. "Why the dickens he hasn't come down before, I do not know. Really young men have changed since my day. Not that Morlake is a chick, I suppose he's fifty."

"Fifty!" she said scornfully. "He may be thirty but he's not much more."

"There is very little difference between thirty and fifty, as you will discover when you are my age," said his lordship. "I sent him a note asking him to come over to breakfast, but I don't suppose he is up."

"He is up every morning at six, Daddy," she corrected him severely, "hours before you dream of coming down."

"I dream of it," he murmured, "but I don't do it. How do you know?"

"He told me a whole lot about himself in Morocco," she said, and the subject of their discussion was ushered in at that moment.

All his fears had come back to him, and her attitude did not make matters any better. She seemed scarcely interested in his recital of what he had been doing since he came to London, a recital called for by Lord Creith's persistent question:

"But why on earth haven't you been down?" demanded his lordship. "Joan——"

"Will you please leave me out of it?" said Joan immediately. "Mr. Morlake isn't at all interested in my views."

"On the contrary," said Jim hastily, "I am very much interested, and as I say I had a tremendous lot of work to do."

"And I hope you did it," said Joan briskly, "and now I'm going to the dairy. And don't come with me," she said as he half rose, "because I shall be very busy for the next two hours."

"You're staying to lunch, Morlake?"

"How absurd, Daddy," she said. "One would think Mr. Morlake had come down from London for the day! We're upsetting all his household arrangements and the admirable Mr. Cleaver will never forgive you."

Lord Creith stared glumly at the visitor after the girl had gone.

"That cuts out lunch so far as you're concerned, my boy," he said. "You're going to stay over for the hunting, of course?"

"I don't think so." Jim was annoyed, though he made an effort not to show it. "The country doesn't appeal to me very much. I came down to get my house in order. I've only paid one visit to Wold House since I returned from Morocco. I'm going to America next week," he added.

"It is a nice country," said his lordship, oblivious to the fact that he was called upon to show some regret or surprise.

Jim went home feeling particularly foolish and was irritated at himself that he had been guilty of such childishness.

The visitor was gone when Joan came back to lunch.

"Where is Mr. Morlake?" she asked.

"He's gone home, where you sent him," said Lord Creith, unfolding a serviette with care.

"But I thought he was staying to lunch?"

Lord Creith raised his pained eyes at this shocking piece of inconsistency.

"You knew jolly well he was not staying to lunch, Joan!" he said severely. "How could the poor man stay to lunch when you sent him home? I'm going to London to-morrow to see him off."

"Where?" she gasped.

"He's going to America," said his lordship, "South America, probably. And," he added, "he will be away ten years."

"Did he tell you that?" she demanded, staring at him.

"He didn't mention the period," he answered carefully, "but I gathered from his general outlook on things that he finds Creith dull and that a few healthy quibbles with a boa-constrictor on the banks of the perfectly horrible Amazon would bring amusement into his life. Anyway, he's going. Not that I intended seeing him off. I can't be bothered."

"But seriously, Daddy, is he leaving Creith?"

His lordship raised his eyes wearily and sighed.

"I've told you twice that he's going to America. That is the truth." He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I don't want anything, thank you, Peters."

"Aren't you eating? You've been drinking milk," accused his lordship. "There's nothing like milk for putting you off your food. And it will make you fat," he added.

"I haven't been drinking milk. I'm just simply not hungry."

"Then you'd better see the doctor."

She dropped her head on her hands, her white teeth biting at her underlip. Lunch promised to be a silent meal until she said:

"I don't believe he is going!"

"Who?"

"Who were we talking about?"

"We haven't talked about anybody for a quarter of an hour," said his lordship in despair. "You're the most unsociable woman I've ever dined with. Usually people do their best to amuse me. And believe me I pay for amusing! He's going!"

She raised her eyebrows to signify her indifference.

"I don't believe he is going," she said. "I'm hungry and there isn't anything to eat. I hate lamb!"

Her parent sighed patiently.

"Go and lunch with him, my dear, for heaven's sake! Take a message from me that you're growing more and more unbearable every day. I wonder, by the way, if you'll ever develop into an old maid? We had an aunt in our family—you remember Aunt Jemima—she was taken that way. She bred rabbits, if I remember aright. . . ."

But Joan did not want to discuss her Aunt Jemima and flounced up to her room.

His lordship was in his study when he saw her walking across the meadows in the direction of Wold House and shook his head. Joan could be very trying. . . .

"Thank you, Cleaver," said Jim. "I don't think I want any lunch."

"It is a woodcock, sir," said Cleaver anxiously. "You told me last night you could enjoy a woodcock."

Jim shuddered.

"Take it away, it seems almost human! Why do they serve woodcocks with their heads on? It isn't decent."

"Shall I get you a chop, sir?"

"No, thanks, a glass of water, and bring me some cheese—no, I don't think I'll have any cheese—oh, I don't want anything," he said, and got up and poked the fire savagely.

"Jane Smith," said a voice from the doorway. "I've announced myself."

She took off her coat and handed it to Cleaver and threw her hat on to a chair.

"Have you had any lunch?"

"I haven't; I'm not hungry."

"What have you got for lunch?" she asked.

"We have a woodcock," said Jim dismally. "It isn't enough for two."

"Then you can have something else," said Joan, and rang the bell. "Jim, are you going to America?"

"I don't know. I'm going somewhere out of this infernal place," he said gloomily. "The country gives me the creeps;

snowing all the morning and the sound of the wind howling round the house makes my hair stand up."

"You're not going anywhere, you are staying in Creith; I've decided that," said Joan.

She was eating bread and butter hungrily.

"Don't they feed you at home?" asked Jim looking at her in wonder.

"What are you going to do about us?" was her reply.

"What do you mean—us?" he asked, inwardly quaking.

"About our marriage. I've taken legal advice and there is not the slightest doubt that we're married. At the same time there's not the least doubt that we're not. You see I've been to two sets of lawyers."

"Have you really?"

She nodded.

"I haven't been to lawyers exactly, but I've written to two newspapers that give free advice and one says one thing and one says the other. Now what are we to do?"

"What do you want to do?" he countered.

"I want to get a divorce," she said calmly, "except for the publicity. I shall base my petition on incompatibility of temperament."

"That isn't a good cause in this country."

"We shall see."

Jim drew a long face.

"There's another way out of the trouble, Mrs. Morlake," he said.

"Don't call me Mrs. Morlake. At the worst, I am Lady Joan Morlake. Jim, are you really going to America?"

"I've had very serious thoughts about it," he said. "But honestly, what are we to do, Joan? My lawyer says that it is no marriage because the necessary licence is not issued, and the mere fact that a clergyman performed the ceremony does not legalise it."

Consternation was in her face when he looked at her.

"Do you mean that?" she said.

"Are you sorry?"

"No, I'm not exactly sorry. I'm annoyed. That means that

we've got to get married all over again. And, Jim, that will take an awful time. . . ."

Cleaver, coming in at that moment, turned round and went out again very quickly, and it seemed almost as if the woodcock winked.

CHAPTER LXVII

The Return

IT HAD snowed all night. The roads were ankle-deep but the man who tramped doggedly through the mean streets of East London hardly noticed the weather. It was too early to get a cab. The little ship had come in with the tide and was moored near Tower Bridge and he had had some difficulty in persuading the man at the docks to let him pass, but as he carried no luggage, that difficulty had been overcome, and now he was heading for the city.

He passed Billingsgate, crowded even at that early hour, and turning up Monument Hill, came to the Mansion House. Here he found a wandering taxi which set him down at the end of Grosvenor Place. There was nobody in sight. The snow was falling again and a fierce wind had driven the policeman to cover. The blinds of the house were drawn, he noticed, and wondered whether it was empty. Taking a key from his pocket, he opened the door.

Nothing had been moved. He had sold the house and the new tenant had told him he would not wish to take possession for a year. He muttered his satisfaction. Looking into the drawing-room, he saw it was untouched. On one of the tables was an embroidery frame, the needle showed in the fabric and he nodded. Lydia was here then, she had not returned to Paris, and she was wise. On the way upstairs he met a servant coming down and the woman stared at him as though he were a ghost. Fortunately he knew her.

"You needn't tell anybody I'm back," he said gruffly and went on to his room.

It looked very desolate with its sheeted furniture. The floors were bare and the bed innocent of clothing. He took off his overcoat and looked at himself in the glass with a queer smile, and he heard a rustle of feet on the landing outside. The door opened suddenly and Lydia came in in her dresisng-gown.

"Ralph!" she gasped. "Millie told me that she had seen you."

"Well, she told the truth," he said, looking at her strangely. "So you're here, are you?"

"Yes, Ralph, I came straight back."

"After telling the police as much as you could about me?"

"I told them nothing," she said.

He grunted his disbelief.

"Ralph, there's a story about Sadi Hafiz. He was murdered in Morocco and you were—you were in the house."

"Well?" he asked.

"Is that true?"

"I didn't know he was dead," he said, not meeting her eyes. "Besides, what happened in Morocco is nothing to do with us here. They can't extradite me for a murder committed in a foreign country. And if they do who's to prove I did it? Sadi Hafiz got what was coming to him," he said cunningly. "I killed him because he insulted you."

She knew he was not speaking the truth but did not argue with him.

"The police have been here," she began.

"Of course they've been here. Haven't you been running round with old Welling? I heard about it in Tangier. As to the police, I'm going to Welling this morning."

"Ralph, you're not!" She laid her hand on his arm but he shook it off.

"I'm going to Welling this morning, I tell you. I've been thinking things over on the ship and I'm sick of living like a hunted dog. If they've got anything on me, let them produce it. If it is a question of trial, why I'll stand my trial! Get me something to eat."

She hurried away, coming back to tell him that she had laid a tray in his study.

"I suppose the police have looked there too, haven't they?"

"They didn't look anywhere, Ralph," she said, "they merely called. They had no warrant——"

"Hadn't they?" He turned on her quickly, a gleam in his eyes. "That means that they're not sure of themselves," he added. "I'll see old Welling to-day and he will be a very surprised man. Then I'm going down to Creith, my property," he said emphatically.

"Ralph, you're mad to go to the police," she said tremulously, "couldn't you go abroad somewhere?"

"I've had too much of abroad already. I tell you I'm going to surprise old man Welling."

Inspector Welling was not easily shocked, but when a policeman came into his office that morning and laid a card on his table he almost jumped from his chair.

"Is he here?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, sir, in the waiting-room."

"He himself?" He could not believe his ears.

"Yes, sir."

"Bring him along," and even then he did not expect to see Ralph Hamon.

Yet it was the Ralph of old, with his immaculate silk hat and his well-fitting morning coat, who walked into the office and laid his cane upon the officer's table and smiled down into his astonished face.

"Good-morning, Welling," he said cheerfully. "I understand that you have been looking for me?"

"I certainly have," said Welling, recovering from the shock of surprise.

"Well, here I am," said Hamon, and found a chair for himself.

He looked ten years older than he had when Welling saw him last, and the frothy little locks that covered the top of his head had completely disappeared, leaving him bald.

"I want you to account for what you did—or, at any rate, for your movements—in Morocco," said Welling, beginning

cautiously. Anything further that he might have said was interrupted by his visitor's laughter.

"You can't ask me anything, Welling, or make any enquiries, unless you are requested to do so by the police authorities of that district in which Sadi Hafiz died. You see, I am making no disguise of the fact that I know it is Sadi Hafiz's murder you are thinking about. My sister tells me you also require certain information concerning Farringdon and his untimely end. I can only tell you that, at the time of his murder, I was in London, and if you can prove to the contrary you are welcome to take any steps which you may think necessary."

The detective looked at him from under his bushy eyebrows.

"And what of the murder in the little cottage overlooking the Devil's Punch Bowl?" he asked.

Not a muscle of Ralph Hamon's face moved.

"That is a new one to me," he said, "though the locality sounds familiar. I had a bungalow there—or in that region."

"It is about the bungalow I am speaking," said Welling. "A man was killed there, stripped and put into a sailor's suit, and left for dead on the Portsmouth Road. He was picked up, as you probably know, by Mr. James Lexington Morlake, and conveyed to the Cottage Hospital, where he died. I have examined the premises, and I find bloodstains on the wall of the kitchen."

Ralph Hamon smiled slowly.

"Have you also found that I put them there?" he asked drily. "Really, Captain Welling, I am not prepared to discuss these crimes in detail. What I do ask you plainly is this." He got up and walked across to the table, and stood leaning upon its edge, looking down into Welling's upturned face.

"Have you any charge to make against me? Because, if you have, I am here to answer that charge."

Welling did not reply. The enemy had carried the war into his country, and had established a very favourable point for himself. He was practically demanding an enquiry into rumour and a precipitation of suspicion. There was no warrant for the man, no definite charge against him. Even Scotland Yard

would hesitate to arrest Ralph Hamon on the information it possessed; and he knew that the man was on safe ground when he said that no charge could follow the murder of Sadi Hafiz unless representations had been made by the Moorish Government—and none had been made.

"Most of the charges are those which you are bringing yourself," he drawled. "I do not even ask you to produce your pocket-case and show me its contents."

He watched the man narrowly as he spoke. If Hamon had shown the slightest uneasiness, if he had turned the conversation elsewhere, if he had protested against the suggestion, he would have arrested the man on the spot and have searched him, on any charge that came into his head. But the answer of Ralph Hamon was characteristic. He dived his hand into his pocket and flung the case on to the table.

"Look for yourself," he said, "and if you wish to search me . . ." he flung out his arms—"you are at liberty."

Welling opened the case and examined the papers it contained with a professional eye. Then he handed the leather pouch back to its owner.

"Thank you," he said. "I will not detain you, Mr. Hamon."

Hamon picked up his hat and stick, pulled on his gloves and walked leisurely to the door.

"If you want me, you know where you will find me—either at my house in Grosvenor Place, or at my country residence, Creith House."

Welling smiled.

"I never find anybody except in the place I put them," he said.

Ralph Hamon strolled down the long corridor, twirling his stick, and out on to the Thames Embankment, where a hired car was awaiting him. On his way through the Park he looked back wondering which of the taxicabs which were bowling along behind contained the shadow that Welling had affixed to him.

He found Lydia waiting in a state of nervous tension.

"What did they say, Ralph?" she asked, almost before he was in the room.

"What could they say?" he smiled contemptuously.

He went to her writing bureau, pulled out a cheque book and sat down.

"Since you are so infernally nervous, you had better go off to Paris this afternoon," he said, and, writing a cheque, tore it out and handed it to her.

She looked at the amount and gasped; then, from the cheque, her eyes went back to her brother.

"Have you this amount in the bank?" she asked, and he swung round to stare at her.

"Of course I have," he said.

He turned again to the table, wrote another cheque and, enclosing it in an envelope, added a card: "With Compliments," and, having addressed the envelope, rang the bell.

"We have no butler now, Ralph," she said nervously. "Would you like me to take the letter to the post? Are you staying in?" she added.

"No," he answered curtly, "I am going to my wife."

Her hand went up to her mouth.

"Your wife, Ralph?" she faltered. "I did not know you were married."

"I am referring to Joan," he said gravely, and went out, and up to his room.

She sat motionless, twisting a torn handkerchief in her hand, and after a while she heard him come down again and the street door close. She went to the window and looked out, to see him enter his car and drive off. He had changed his attire, and wore the suit he had been wearing when he arrived that morning. Before the car was out of sight, she was flying up to her room to dress, for she knew that the moment of crisis was at hand.

CHAPTER LXVIII

The End of Hamon

WELLING was going out to lunch when she arrived, and he met her literally on the doorstep.

"I must see you, Captain Welling, at once," she said. "It is vitally important."

"Come back to my room," he said kindly. "You look ill, Lydia."

"I am distracted. I don't know what I shall do," she said, her voice trembling.

In his room he poured her a glass of water, and waited until she was sufficiently composed to tell him the object of her visit.

"It is about Ralph," she said. "He was here this morning?"

The old man nodded with a rueful smile.

"He was here, and he emerged with flying colours," he said. "If it was a bluff, it was the cleverest bluff I've met with. You have seen him since?"

She nodded.

"He came back to the house, and I haven't seen him so buoyant in years. He asked me if I would like to go to Paris, and gave me a cheque. Here it is."

She handed him the cheque and the detective took it and read, and when he had read, he whistled. For the sum which Ralph Hamon had drawn was a million pounds!

"What is that?" he asked, seeing the envelope in the girl's hand. It was addressed to him, he saw. "From your brother?" he asked with a frown.

She nodded, and, tearing open the envelope, he extracted a second cheque, which was also for a million pounds.

Welling bit his lip.

"That looks pretty bad to me," he said. "Where is he now?"

"He's gone off to see Joan. He called her his wife," said the girl.

She was crying softly, and he put his arm around her shoulder and patted her cheek.

"You're going to have a bad time for a while, Lydia," he said, "and I am going to help you all I know how. You must stay at an hotel to-night, and not your maid or any of your servants must know where you are. Come and lunch."

She protested that she had no appetite, but he insisted, and did not leave her until he had carried her bag into the vestibule of the Grand Central and handed her over to the especial care of the hotel detective.

He had come so far in a taxicab, but a big police car was waiting for him, with three men from police headquarters.

Jim was practising with a golf club on the lawn when the car arrived.

"A queer occupation," said Welling, for the snow lay thick everywhere.

"If you dip a gold ball in ink——" began Jim lightly, when he caught sight of the car's three half-frozen men who were huddled in its depths. "Come inside, Welling," he said. "What is the trouble?"

"There is trouble for somebody, and I'm not quite sure who it is going to be," said Welling.

He told all he knew, related the incident of the cheques, and Jim listened in silence.

"I am putting two men at Creith House. You had better put up the other here."

Jim shook his head.

"Let the three go to Creith House," he said. "I can look after myself. Has he left London?"

Welling nodded.

"He had a car in a garage—a public garage—near by. Unfortunately, I was not able to trace that until it was too late. This afternoon he took it out, and since then he has not been seen."

Snow was falling heavily when the police car turned through the gates of Creith House and made a slow and noisy way up the drive. Lord Creith watched the arrival from the dining-

room window, and came to the door to meet them. At the first sight of Welling his face fell.

"There is going to be bother," he said fretfully. "You stormy old petrel!"

They were glad to get into the warmth and cosiness of the library, for it was bitterly cold and the snow was freezing as it fell.

"Who are you after?" asked Creith anxiously. "Not Hamon?"

Welling nodded.

"Hamon it is. He is in England, and probably not four miles from Creith," he said, and his lordship looked serious.

"Where is Joan?" asked Welling.

"She is out," said Creith. "Mrs. Cornford asked her to go down to lunch at the cottage."

Welling shook his head reprovingly.

"From now on, until this man is under lock and key, she must not be allowed out alone," he said. "Somebody ought to go and bring her back."

But Jim was already on his way. He ploughed knee-deep through the icy covering, and, finding that the short cut to the cottage would in the end be the longest way, he struggled back to the drive and followed the wall path. Here he found the tracks of Joan; the impress of her rubber boots was plain, and he felt a little thrill of satisfaction in this evidence of her nearness.

Then, for no apparent reason, the footprints turned to the right, entering the deeper snow that had drifted about a clump of bushes. With an exclamation of surprise, he followed them. They led him deeper and deeper into the snow, until they turned again and disappeared.

He peered into the bushes but could see no sign of her. Crushing his way between the snow-covered boughs, he found a comparatively clear space where the grass showed. But there was no sign of Joan. She must have gone out somewhere, and he pushed his way clear of the bushes, to find her tracks leading to the path again.

He stood with a frown on his forehead, puzzling out her ec-

centric movements. And then he saw another set of footprints which were obviously recent, for the falling snow had not yet obliterated them. They were fairly small, and the toes were pointed. He gasped—Hamon! The girl must have seen him coming along the path, and then flown on to her destination.

He turned back, this time following Hamon's tracks. There were two sets: one going toward Creith House and the other returning; and presently he found the place where the man had turned. Jim unbuttoned his overcoat and took from his pocket the little black automatic, and slipped it into his overcoat; and then, hurrying as fast as the snow would allow him, he made for the gardener's cottage, all the time keeping his eyes upon the footprints.

At the end of the path the two sets branched off—Joan's toward the cottage. He ran up the cottage path, and a glance at the house told him that something unusual had happened. The shutters were drawn in every room. He knocked at the door, and, receiving no answer, knocked again more loudly.

"Are you there, Mrs. Cornford?" he called, and he thought he heard a creaking sound inside, and flung himself against the door.

It shook under his weight, and an agonised voice called:

"If you open the door, I will shoot you."

It was the voice of Joan!

"It is I, Joan," he called eagerly. "Look through the keyhole—it is Jim!"

He walked back half-a-dozen paces in order to give her a clear view, and, as he did so, he felt his hat jerked violently from his head. That and the crack of the explosion came together, and he spun round to face the danger. Nobody was in sight.

And then the door of the cottage opened.

"Keep inside," he cried. "For God's sake don't come out."

Ping!

The bullet struck the wall of the cottage with a snap, and, running, he gained the shelter of the passage and slammed the door.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" sobbed the girl distraitly. "Oh, Jim, I'm

frightened—frightened! I saw him in the grounds," she went on, when he had soothed her.

"And you hid in the bushes—I followed your tracks. He didn't see you?"

She shook her head.

"Not until I was nearly at the cottage, and then he ran after me. Mrs. Cornford had seen him, and had put up her shutters. It is Hamon, isn't it?"

Jim nodded.

The shutters operated from inside the house, and he gently raised the lower half of one and peered out. He had hardly done so before a bullet smashed the window, tore a long, jagged hole in the wooden shutter, and temporarily numbed his hand with the shock.

"I think we had better wait," he said. "Welling will have heard the shots. Our only hope is that friend Hamon guesses, by my hasty retreat, that I am unarmed, and comes to close quarters."

"Have you no weapon?" she asked anxiously.

He produced a little pistol.

"Only this," he said, "which is comparatively useless except at short range. It is, in fact," he smiled, "the weapon with which I have terrified night watchmen and unfortunate banking officials these ten years past."

He had rightly estimated the effect of his precipitate flight upon the cunning madman who was glaring at the house from behind the cover of a wood pile. Hamon knew that Jim Morlake would not fly into the house if he had a gun handy; and he knew, too, that the sound of the shooting must soon bring assistance. Already a curious and fearful knot of children had gathered in the middle of the street at a respectful distance, and if he were to accomplish his great revenge, and bring to fruition a plan that had occupied his mind for the past three months, he must move quickly.

He sprang from his place of concealment and ran across the cottage garden; and, as he expected, he drew no fire from the house. He looked round for something he could use as a battering-ram, and his eyes returned to the wood pile, and,

going back, he picked up a heavy branch and brought it to the door. The whole cottage seemed to shake under the impact of the ram, and Jim, watching from the passage, knew that the lock would not stand another blow.

"Keep back," he warned the girl in a whisper, and slipped through the door which led from the passage into the room where Farringdon had lost his life.

Again Hamon struck, and the lock broke with a crash. In another second, Hamon had pushed open the door, and, gun in hand, had stepped in. He saw the open doorway and guessed who stood there.

"Come out, Morlake!" he screamed. "Come out, you dog!"

He fired at the lintel, and the bullet ricochetted past Jim's face. Jim was waiting for the second shot, and when it came he leapt out, his little black pistol levelled.

Before Hamon could fire, Jim pressed the trigger. There was no explosion. Only from the muzzle of the black "gun" shot with terrific force a white spray of noxious vapour. It struck the would-be murderer in the face, and with a choking gasp he fell heavily to the floor.

Jim's eyes were watering, he himself found it difficult to breathe, and he came back for a moment to the girl, who held her handkerchief to her mouth.

"Open the windows," he ordered quickly, and then went back to the unconscious man, just as Welling and his men came flying up the path.

"It isn't pleasant, is it?" said Jim, eyeing his stubby gun with a smile. "It has never carried a cartridge, because it isn't built that way. It throws a spray of pure ammonia vapour, and throws it a considerable distance."

It was necessary to put the maniac into a strait-jacket before he could be moved to the nearest lock-up, and they did not see Welling again until he came to Creith House late that afternoon, weary and bedraggled, but with a look of triumph in his eyes.

"Well," he said, speaking to the company in general but addressing Jim, "I have discovered the mystery is not such a mystery after all. And why I did not hit upon the solution as

soon as I heard and knew that you were burgling banks and strong rooms in order to secure a document which would incriminate Ralph Hamon, I cannot for the life of me understand. Maybe I am getting old and dull."

"I am too," said the girl, "for it certainly puzzles me."

Lord Creith stretched his hands to the blazing warmth, rubbed them together and ruminated profoundly.

"I give it up too—our American friend must explain. But perhaps you have the document, Welling?"

Captain Welling smiled.

"It is here," he said, and produced Ralph Hamon's pocket-book. "It seemed incredible to me that Hamon should carry about with him a statement written by his victim that would most inevitably bring him to the gallows if it ever was produced in a court of law."

"Then why the devil didn't he burn it?" asked Lord Creith irritably, and for answer Welling produced the document.

Lord Creith read it through with a frown.

"He could have burnt this——" he began.

"Turn it over," said Welling quietly, and Creith obeyed.

He stared for a moment at the engraved letters on the other side.

"Good God!" he said.

The statement was written on the back of a Bank of England note for £100,000.

"He could have burnt it," said Jim, "but his natural cupidity would not allow him to destroy so much money. He dared not pay it into the bank; he could not bring himself to do away with the evidence of his guilt. When I found John Cornford, he was dying, and the first name I heard was that of Ralph Hamon, whom I had met once in Tangier and knew to be a shady customer. And then I recognised in the sailor the mysterious visitor that Hamon had had some months before. Little by little, I learnt from the half-sane man the story of Hamon's villainy. In order that he might not be wronged, Cornford had changed all his money into one note of a hundred thousand pounds. I was able to trace that at the bank, and even if Hamon had presented it for payment, it would have been stopped. The

monkey and the gourd," he mused; "he could not let go of his treasure and he was caught."

. . . . . .

On a bitterly cold day in January, when the whole country was ice-bound, and rivers which had never known obstruction were frozen from bank to bank, Jim Morlake and Joan Carston came out of Creith parish church, man and wife. They left that afternoon by car for London, and it was Joan's wish that they should make a détour through Ascot.

"You are sure you don't mind, Jim?" she asked for the tenth time, as the car was rolling swiftly along the frozen Bagshot Road.

"Why, of course not, honey. It is very dear of you."

"He was a boy, just a silly, romantic boy, who had held such promise of a big career, and I feel that this—this ruined him."

She was thinking of Ferdinand Farringdon, and Jim understood. They halted near the place where the black pines hid the little church in the wood, and she handed a great bunch of lilies to Jim as he got out of the car.

"Lay them on the altar, Jim," she said, and he nodded and slammed the door tight.

The cold was phenomenal: it struck through his fur-lined coat and made his fingers tingle. How different it was in winter, he thought! And yet the chapel in the wood had a beauty of its own, even on this drear day. As he turned to cross, he stood looking, and then he saw the figure crouched against the steps —a bundle of rags that bore no semblance to anything human. He ran forward and looked down into the cold, grey face, strangely beautiful in death. What freak impulse brought Bannockwaite to the door of the church he had built, there to die in the cold night?

Jim looked round: there was nobody in sight, and, stooping, he laid the lilies on the dead man's stiffened hands, and, bareheaded, walked back to the car.

THE END

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